

ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

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October 1975

Dear Reader:

Gray matter appears to play a bigger role in this month's collection of new stories than in some issues, and appropriately so with the back-to-school movement at this time of year.

However, that bodes no ill for students of the macabre and the bizarre. The abundance of brainpower can only heighten the suspense.

Interspersed among the late lamented in this issue are such mind-benders as mental telepathy, a grand swindle, a psychological experiment, blackmail with a twist, and just plain good detection. This is a most enlightening classroom.

The writers herein represented make me feel worthy of a deanship for providing this laboratory for their midnight machinations. You may see for yourself the importance of being wise, from *Hear No Evil* by Kevin O'Donnell, Jr. to the novelette by Dick Ellis titled *Time to Kill*.

Indeed, there is no time to kill, but enough else. Please get on with it.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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Using one's "talents" to full advantage may be the only road to survival.



The clear April night was softening New Haven's coarseness when Ralph McGuire stepped out of the Timothy Dwight Dining Hall. After checking the lock, he chained shut a wrought-iron gate. The spring air's hint of the sea

brought on a smile, and relief at being out of the steamy kitchen. He tossed his keys from hand to hand while he walked up Wall Street to Temple.

The day had been good. The crew had put out 337 dinners.

with no strain or tension. The line had moved well. At the end, McGuire and his cook had grinned at each other over the two ounces of roast beef left in the steamer pan.

Any manager would have been pleased, but McGuire had a special reason for feeling good. He hadn't had to eavesdrop any worker more than once; he hadn't had to probe anyone. That meant he finally had the people he wanted. They hadn't always been there; it had taken him nearly eight months to find them. If his luck held, he could soon dispense with the eavesdropping completely.

When the Yale University Dining Hall system had hired him, the burly, moustachioed associate director had made a point of telling him, "You should know just why there's an opening, Ralph. Maybe that'll keep you from caus-

by Kevin
O'Donnell, Jr.

ing another. Timothy Dwight's food cost is too high: 83 cents per meal served. The other dining halls do nicely on 71 cents." He had shaken his head and leaned back in his swivel chair. "We don't think TD students eat more

than other Yalies. We don't think the managers we send there are less competent than other managers. We suspect theft. With TD on the very edge of campus, it's easy for a cook or pot-washer to hand a package out the back door to a friend, but it's the manager's job to stop theft. If he can't . . . well, we just can't afford to keep him." In a rush of irritation, the associate director had banged his desk. "This \$2400 a month is too damn much, it's gotta stop! I don't care how you do it—that's up to you. But the choice ought to be pretty clear: stop the stealing or lose your job."

The *Manager's Manual* suggested that constant package inspection could stop theft, but McGuire realized its drawbacks. People, especially innocent ones, have an aversion to being searched. They become resentful, and work sloppily. He shuddered as he thought of what resentment could do to his dining hall. An angry worker doesn't care. Careless serving can cause waste; careless cooking can cause tragedy. He thrust the Manual's suggestion out of his mind.

Closing the heavy book, he told the associate director, "I don't like frisking them. There's another way and I'll bet I'll find it. Let me look around, let me examine

the floor plans and all. I'm good at detecting suspicious behavior. A few well-publicized firings, and we'll see . . ."

"If you think so . . ."

"I do."

"OK, then—but remember, they're cagey. They're good at disguising 'suspicious behavior.' They should be; they've had enough practice."

They may have had practice, McGuire had thought as he left the office, but they can't hide from a telepath. No way. He had strode on for a moment in reflection. High time this came in handy. Twelve years I've had it, and it's done no good at all. Damn car accident . . .

It was a dark December night on a twisty Connecticut road. He and three other 16-year-olds had been driving and drinking; they were hurrying home before their parents became suspicious. McGuire was at the wheel, slamming the rattling VW through sharp corners, goosing it down shadow-dappled straightaways. Then he tried what he imagined to be a racing turn—full speed into the curve, jerk the wheel, stamp the brake, twist some more, let it skid, and floor it. It would have worked if a station wagon hadn't been coming from the

opposite direction, also speeding.

McGuire sobered instantly as high beams blinded him. The boy next to him fainted. He heard the other driver bellow. The right headlights of the two cars kissed and exploded in a fury of powdered glass. He remembered nothing more.

He awoke in a bed. Crisp sheets pressed his aching body down. Pain throbbed through his ribs; his right arm was far too heavy. He tried to open his eyes and failed. His left hand stiffly patted the bandages wrapped around his head. Before the question in his mind could find form, it was answered by a memory of swerving lights, and of tires screaming in terror.

Then he heard the voices around him. None was happy—pain colored and distorted every one. For a few minutes he fought to separate them, but the effort was too great. Relaxing his tensed muscles, he slumped back.

A voice nearby said, "He is awake." It repeated, more loudly, "See, I told you, he is awake. Nurse!"

I'm in a hospital, was all McGuire had time to think before a maternal presence enveloped him. He could hear rubber-soled shoes come closer. A different voice, one filled with love and

pity, said softly, "The poor boy."

That's rather unprofessional, thought McGuire.

"So you're awake, are you, son? That's good. My name is Mrs. Flanagan. I'm the day nurse. You'll have questions, I'm sure, but remember I'm not a doctor." She mumbled, "Water," and more clearly, "would you like a glass of water?"

Not trusting his voice, McGuire nodded. It hurt his head. A second later, a thin plastic tube slipped between his lips. Cool water trickled into his mouth. The sensation so delighted him that he failed to hear the doctor approach.

"Hell. Covered the kid's eyes," grumbled the new arrival. "Good morning, Mrs. F."

As McGuire's jaw dropped in surprise, he felt a tugging at his bandages. Then came the soft metal chuckle of scissors on gauze. In an instant, he was staring at a stout, badly-shaven doctor.

"That feel better?—damn no-good," he heard the doctor say.

He blinked twice. Glancing at Mrs. Flanagan with wide eyes, he stuttered, "P-p-pardon me?"

Before parting his lips, the doctor distinctly said, "Crash damage ears? Stupid to tie him up." Then his mouth moved as he said loudly, "I asked, is that better?"

McGuire's eyes darted to the nurse, who, though smiling, was saying, "I hope that won't leave an ugly scar." Between two rapid heartbeats, fear sprouted in McGuire's brain. Just as it began to choke him, Mrs. Flanagan, lips motionless, contentedly continued, "I'm glad I'm well-trained and he can't read minds. If—"

He didn't understand another word. The nurse's statement had scythed through his fear, leaving a sense of awe. *Read minds*, he thought. *I can read minds!*

During his two weeks in the hospital, McGuire kept himself busy by studying his power: The long ward with its regularly-spaced patients became his laboratory. By following Mrs. Flanagan's mind, and by listening to her conversations, he learned to separate the jumble of noises into individual voices, and to link them with the faces he saw.

Within a day after discovering his ability, he devised a workable analogy for it: it was simply a mental ear. His physical ears heard physically-manufactured sounds; his mental ear heard mentally-manufactured ones. Also analogously, his telepathy weakened as distance increased. He could detect no thought more than 625 feet away; between 625 and 25 feet he could discern

thoughts by straining, much as one can hear a faint sound by listening carefully for it. As the distance between himself and the thinker lessened further, he was forced to strain *not* to hear. When it dropped below five feet, his concentrating on something else could no longer help him ignore the clamor, even if he chose not to interpret it.

Bored with reading, watching television, and amusing his awkward visitors, McGuire practiced. Before he was discharged, he had developed three kinds of telepathic reception: thoughts, emotions, and sense impressions.

Thoughts were easy. Most people keep up running mental monologues that can easily be eavesdropped. Emotions were harder, because they rarely occur singly. One gives rise to another and reinforces a third, which in turn emphasizes a fourth. McGuire found sense impressions the most difficult, because few people are aware of what their bodies are noticing, unless it be extreme pain or extreme pleasure. This disappointed him, until he learned how to tap others' nerve lines ahead of the filters that every sane mind contains. Then the torrent of "physicalness" was frightening. In time, he discovered how to build his own filters,

which scaled intercepted raw impressions down to a level that was tolerable, but still high enough to be interesting.

McGuire never told anyone about his new-grown ear. Though young, he was mature enough to suspect the future that would have awaited him. He forced himself to remain silent, even at times when it seemed that his secret must erupt from his mouth.

Yes, sir, he had thought, stepping into TD after his talk with the associate director, the damn thing is finally gonna pay for the trouble it's caused me. He had been grimly satisfied as he scanned the high-ceilinged dining hall. *Nope, he decided, can't take much out this way. Too many witnesses.* Passing into the serving area, he saw the 20' by 20' room had no access to the outside. *Safe.* The red-tiled kitchen was next. He walked through its towering racks of pots and pans, and pushed open one of the windows at the far end. *Can't get it open wide enough to hand anything out, he judged. That leaves the back door.* He wandered around the kitchen for a while longer, pausing by the huge steam kettle to see whether the landing on the back stairs was visible. It wasn't. From the long, cast-iron stove, he found the stairs

themselves were hidden. Nobody in there could see anybody going out the back, unless he stood by the door to the stairs. He went up to his office. Once slouched behind his battered desk, he couldn't see even the opposite side of the street. *That damn back door's almost invisible. That's the weak spot.*

External thieves didn't bother McGuire. The back door was spring-locked; the street was so busy that few lock-pickers dared to practice their art. But internal thieves . . . who questions a man in a white uniform when he calmly loads a van?

When the dining hall opened in September, McGuire had taken a seemingly insignificant step; on the employee bulletin board in the kitchen, he had posted a brief message: *Please remember that under Section 12, Paragraph D of the union contract, I have the right to inspect any package carried out of the building by any person leaving the building. Employees discovered to be carrying dining hall property through the door in the direction of Wall St. will be fired on the spot.*

Then he threw a telepathic "net" over the staircase.

He came to work early every day. As he unlocked the door, he imposed his net. With practice, he

found he could maintain it unconsciously—it was less strenuous than the physical effort of listening for a particular sound. After the first week of operation, he could be anywhere in the building and still notice a guilty conscience thinking of slipping out.

The effort had paid off; thefts had stopped. Unfortunately, he had been forced to fire eight of the dining hall's twenty-three full-time workers, including the store-room man and all three cooks. Rebuilding a staff took time. Only after eight months was he beginning to feel that TD was running properly.

His sigh was carried away by the cool April breeze. Feet scraping on the asphalt, he located his car and wearily climbed in. He twisted a key and the engine purred awake; he flicked a knob and his headlights chewed into the darkness, pinpointing a book-laden couple reluctant to continue on their way to the library. A wry grin on his face, McGuire eased the car into reverse.

As the car slipped along to Guilford, McGuire cursed his talent. Because of it, the evening stretched ahead of him like the road: barren, cheerless, and companionless. He would go home, mix a drink, turn on the stereo, and drop into his leather chair

with a book. Any book, it didn't matter. He didn't want to read, he didn't care about listening to the stereo, but what else can a sensitively misanthropic bachelor do after work? He wanted to talk to someone, but he couldn't. Maybe he'd write for a pen pal after all.

If you have a friend, you spend time with him—you talk to him—you listen to him. If you don't, you soon lose him. If you do, and if you are plagued by an ear that hears the voice in the back of his head, you soon come to hate him. Even the best of friends can't resist a nasty thought now and then. A good friend wouldn't say those things to you, but you hear them all. If you're telepathic, you don't have any friends.

"Or lovers, either," muttered McGuire an hour later, as he rested on the edge of his clean, cold, lonely double bed. He had analyzed his desire for sex and found it composed of other desires. Many could be placated through other means; one he could satisfy by himself. He plumped his pillow, lay down and turned off the bedstand light, and let his mind roam the neighborhood.

The Thomases were always good, try them. No, they were asleep already. The Luzewskis were out; the mournful baby-sitter

was alone and could give him nothing. Dr. Michaelis was too old, not worth checking. The tentacles of McGuire's desire reached and curled about the bedrooms of his neighbors.

As his mind flitted through the Cjaka home, a whisper of excitement caught his questing ear. He paused in the dimly-lit room, searching for an accessible mind. At last he found it, comfortingly male; the signs of heart and sweat and gut were right, but—

"Hell," he heard, "she's dead."

Before another shaft of emotion could pierce him, he withdrew. He was more embarrassed than normally. Sex, that was one thing. It no longer seemed filthy or perverted to eavesdrop on sex. But death—that was private. Death was to be respected. Mourners were to be comforted, not probed.

Flushing slightly, his appetite unsatisfied but deadened, McGuire rolled onto his stomach and pushed himself down the dark hill into sleep.

He awoke early the next morning, to be at the dining hall before the first worker arrived. He resented settling down at his desk just as sunlight began to pace New Haven's silent streets, but the obligation to stop the thefts had forced him into 14-hour days. It had, of course, been effective;

his first storeroom man alone had been stealing fifty dollars' worth of goods daily, all safely packed in the trunk of his car before 7:30 a.m. As McGuire's car barreled along the deserted concrete, he wondered when he'd finally be able to trust his crew.

One problem with arriving at the office at 6:00 a.m. is that one doesn't see the morning paper. As a consequence, McGuire was not ready for Lieutenant Anatoli of the Guilford Homicide Squad. When the thin, balding policeman entered his office at 9:15, McGuire thought he was a salesman. "Hey," he said, "before you waste your time giving me the pitch, let me warn you that I can't order a single product until the staff dietitians clear it. Their office is over on Elm Street, if you want to go right to the top."

The other's smile was fleeting. "That's not quite what I want, Mr. McGuire. I came here to talk to you." He reached into the inner pocket of his coat and extracted a leather folder. "Anatoli, Homicide Squad." The folder opened and a badge sparkled briefly. "I'd like to talk to you about your neighbor, Mrs. Cjaka."

McGuire, who had risen to his feet at the other's first words, frowned involuntarily. "Huh?" Remembering himself, he waved the

lieutenant into a wooden chair some seven feet away. It was a distance at which he felt comfortable—he could probe or ignore at will. "I don't quite understand, Lieutenant. Why?"

The policeman looked both puzzled and displeased. Then sympathetic comprehension gleamed in his bloodshot eyes. "What time did you get here today?"

"About six, but—"

"Then you didn't see the papers," Anatoli interrupted. "Sorry to be so blunt, but Mrs. Cjaka was murdered last night."

"Ann Cjaka?" McGuire dropped into his desk chair. "Professor Cjaka's wife?"

"Yes."

"But why? Who . . . who did it?"

"Believe me, Mr. McGuire, if we knew that, I wouldn't be bothering you so early in the morning." He yawned. "You live near them. I thought maybe you could help us."

"Sure, sure, any way I can."

"Good. First, what time did you get home last night?"

"Geez, I didn't notice. Let's see, I left here about . . . ten after eight, and it's a thirty, forty-minute drive, so . . . twenty, ten of nine, I guess."

"Uh-huh." The lieutenant made a note in a small book that had

appeared in his left hand. He looked up. "And what time did you go to sleep?"

Sudden realization slapped McGuire. He thought, *That must have been him/her/them that I—* He tried to keep his cheeks impassive. "I'm not sure," he said awkwardly. "I—well, I had a drink—wait a minute, I listened to about an hour's worth of tapes, so—I suppose I crawled into bed about ten o'clock, give or take ten minutes. I never look at the clock; my clock radio has been set for five a.m. since September . . . I just slap the button down and turn off the lights; I never look at it."

"Uh-huh." Another note. "The doctor estimated the time of death to be between 9:30 and 10:30. Did you hear any strange noises during that time?"

"You mean gunshots or something?"

"Yes."

"Gee, not that I can recall. Since I'm not near anybody, I keep my stereo turned up loud. If it happened before I shut the set off, I never would have heard a thing. Hell, when it's on, I often don't hear my own telephone ring."

"And afterwards?"

"No, not that I can . . . remember. No, nothing."

"Uh-huh. Did you see any strange cars in the neighborhood?"

McGuire tilted his chair back, screwed his eyes shut, and raised his face to the ceiling. He tried to visualize the darkened street. "No," he said at last, regretfully, "I don't remember any."

"Uh-huh. Did you know Mrs. Cjaka well?"

"No, not really. We were neighbors, of course—I'd see her on the street every once in a while and wave—but I don't have much social life. What with working 14-hour days, I usually just want to crawl into bed when I get home. I never went to any of their parties or barbecues."

"Uh-huh. Did you ever see her here?"

"Oh, sure, once in a while. Her husband is a fellow of TD. That means he's affiliated with it; that's a program to foster closer relationships between the students and the faculty, you know, get them eating together, maybe they'll talk to each other. Professor Cjaka takes a lot of lunches here; every once in a while she'd join him. And they'd come in for dinner once a month or so, for the fellows' meeting."

"Uh-huh. Any gossip about her?"

McGuire squirmed. "Well, you know, just the usual. And I'd hate

to say anything that would—”

“But you should. It might give us a lead.”

“Well, to get the full story, you ought to talk to Flora. She’s the head waitress, and full of gossip. She knows—or claims to know—everything about everybody in any way connected with TD.”

“Uh-huh. I’ll get to her. But why don’t you tell me what you’ve heard?”

“Well . . .” He moved his chair to look out the window. “I’ve heard that she was a little bored with Professor Cjaka. He’s something in the Engineering Department, and I guess that . . . I heard she was not quite content with that sort of thing. You know, earnest, mechanical-minded men and all that. Supposedly, every time she came here she’d spend a lot of time talking to students—to big, athletic, good-looking students. Flora didn’t approve.” He grimaced.

“Uh-huh.” Anatoli raised his eyes. “Anybody in particular?”

“Not that I know of. I don’t like gossip, so when Flora starts up, I usually try to quiet her.” He couldn’t tell Anatoli how Flora nauseated him. She would sidle up close and whisper; her mind would twist and turn each savory scandal to find its worst possible facet. He couldn’t tell him how

uneasy he felt around her, or how many times he’d suggested that another dining hall might be more suitable for her talents than small TD. “You really ought to check with her.”

“I will.” Anatoli stood up. “Look, Mr. McGuire, I don’t want to take up too much of your time. If I find something which I think you might know about, or a question you might have the answer to, I’ll come back. But right now it’s all theory. Mind if I wander around here, asking questions of Flora and the others?”

“Not at all.” McGuire also rose. “In fact, if you want to talk to anyone in private, feel free to use this office. Want me to introduce you?”

“No, but thanks. None of the others live in Guilford so the interviews will be short. I’ll just ask a couple of questions and be on my way.”

“Well, OK. If there’s anything else I can do to help—”

“Sure, Mr. McGuire.” After a last note in the little book, he made it disappear. Then he held out his hand. “Nice talking to you. Thanks a lot.” Their hands touched. McGuire heard Anatoli’s mind emotionlessly declare the meeting unproductive, and McGuire clear.

As the dry and dusty brain

vanished down the steps, McGuire felt his body relax. He couldn't quite understand it. The man had had almost no emotions, none of the slimy acid flickers that most people have. He shouldn't have bothered McGuire. Yet something in the way that mind had pressed against his had left McGuire's nerves on edge; it had felt like leaning against a sun-washed wooden wall on a motionless day. It had been too quiet. No tension had been visible, and some should have been: *Dangerous*, thought McGuire. *Glad he's not after me.*

After finishing the inventory, he decided to make sure that all was ready for lunch. The kitchen was like a shower room; his shirt collar wilted as steam stroked it. Looking through the pot rack, he could see sweat splashing down the first cook's bent neck. As he strolled over, his foot slipped on the damp floor. *Have to talk to Hetherton about that*, he reminded himself. He turned his attention back to the cook, whose flashing fingers were seasoning a pan of chicken.

"Hey, J.J., how's it going?" McGuire liked him, because his chuckling mind was one of the few he could reach. He enjoyed bantering with him whenever the chance arose.

The fingers froze; the cook

looked up. "Hey, Ralph." His round black face opened into an engaging grin. "Not bad, not bad. At the risk of sounding slightly immodest, I venture to suggest that this here pan of chicken is going to be some of the tastiest baked chicken you have evah been privileged to set tooth to. If you make me a solemn promise that you are going to partake of this kewlinary masterpiece, and not have a greasy hamburger for the forty-eighth day in a row, why, I will in return promise you that yours truly will set aside the most delectable piece for you. Promise?"

"Sure enough, J.J." McGuire laughed. "I'm getting tired of hamburgers, anyway."

"Then this is going to taste all the better, Ralph."

"Thanks. You're all set for lunch?"

"Yup. Course, no one's going to mistake poor old TD for Maxim's of Paree, but what can you possibly expect when the master chef is provided with one hundred percent incompetent apprentices?" He threw a mock scowl at the second cook, who was opening a package of frozen beans a few feet down the table. Despite J.J.'s expression, affection glowed warmly in his mind.

"Right on, J.J.," retorted the

second cook. "As soon as you stop talking and start teaching, we gonna find out just how much of a master you really are."

"Keep talking, son—" J.J. smiled in a kindly way, "—and I'll let you have it right between the eyes with a piece of baking chicken. You hear me?"

"Yes, sir!" The second cook winked at McGuire and carried the beans over to the steam kettle, some four feet away. "But tell me, old man, now that I've moved out of the range of your aged arm, just how you gonna connect?"

McGuire laughed again and

slapped J.J. on the shoulder. "OK, chief, I'll get out of your way. See you later—and save that chicken!" He headed for the dish room, a small alcove off the serving room. Passing the clock, he saw that he had enough time to speak to Hetherton, the new general service assistant who washed dishes and mopped floors.

Hetherton was lounging against the dish machine, waiting for lunch time. As McGuire rounded the corner, he guiltily palmed a cigarette and came to sloppy attention. "Hi, Mr. McGuire," he said cheerfully, his hands behind



his back. "What's new with you?"

"Hi, Al. Busy?" He stopped eight feet away. An impression of huge worms slammed into his brain. *What the—* He shut his ear off, but came no closer.

"Nope." An embarrassed look came over his handsome features. "Uh—if you want to talk, Mr. McGuire, could I dump this butt? I'd hate to burn the palm of my hand trying to hide it from you." His light-blue eyes sparkled with the humor of the situation.

"Sure, Al, go ahead." He watched the GSA's powerful back as he wet the cigarette and threw it into a garbage bag. "Say, Al—did you play football?"

Hetherton straightened in surprise. "Yeah. Why?"

"Curiosity—you look big enough, and you seem to move nicely. How come you didn't go on to college ball?"

"Well, you know how it is. I had about all the school I could take; got better things to do." He blushed slightly. "And none of the good places wanted me—the Michigan coach thought I was starting to hear footsteps, so . . . you might say I didn't go to college by mutual agreement."

"Uh-huh . . . well, look, Al, I wanted to talk to you about mopping . . ." As they talked, McGuire wondered why the boy's

calm face reflected none of his turmoil. Deciding it was none of his business, he kept his distance and finished as soon as possible.

As the crew trickled out through the back door, McGuire mentally checked them off. *Flora: clean. J.J.: clean, but where the hell did he get that liquor? Uh-huh . . .* Soon all were gone but one. *Al's slow getting out of here tonight. He couldn't be—he could be. There've been unlikelier thieves.* He arose as the nervous, fretting presence mounted the steps. He could feel the tension heighten as he clattered across his office and down the stairs.

Eyes wary and jaw set, Hetherton was trudging up. A small airline bag in his hand made McGuire groan. *Just a warning,* he thought. *The kid's pretty stupid, but he could be a good worker. Just give him a warning, he'll shape up.*

"Say, Al," he said mildly, "mind if I look in the bag?"

"As a matter of fact, Mr. McGuire," replied the boy uncertainly, "I'd rather you didn't."

"I'm afraid I have to, Al." As he stretched out his arm, Hetherton's hand dipped into the bag, McGuire found himself gazing into the barrel of a .38.

"You shouldn't have insisted,

Mr. McGuire. I don't want to have to kill you, too, but . . ." He made a weak gesture with the gun.

"Me, too?" McGuire started to probe, but the answer came in words.

"Mrs. Cjaka was bad enough, but—"

"Mrs. Cjaka?"

"Yeah." Hetherton shifted unhappily. "I—she'd seen me play in high school, you know, and when she saw me working here . . . well, she told me her husband was a big fan of mine, and invited me out to their house to see movies he took of my best games. Well, Professor Cjaka wasn't there—" He gulped. "—And you can probably guess the rest. I went out to her place every night for about a week, and then . . . and then the professor came back from wherever he'd been, so . . ."

Keep-him-talking-maybe-he-won't-shoot-maybe-somebody'll-come-to-help-keep-him-talking!
"So?"

"Well, then the professor went out of town again. I saw it in the paper," he added defensively. "So I went out to see her, and . . . and there was a car parked in the driveway. I sat in the car for a while, just sort of thinking, you know? While I was sitting there I saw, uh, two shadows in the bed-

room. The light went out. Then I heard a man laugh. So I drove away." Leaning against the black iron banister, Hetherton sighed. The gun dangled forgotten from his left hand. McGuire thought of going for it, until the boy straightened and football-trained muscles rippled under his shirt. McGuire longed to probe him, but he knew that two sets of thoughts would clutter his mind and hamper his ability to think.

The GSA spoke again. "I called her yesterday, said I'd come out after work. She didn't like the idea and tried to say she wouldn't be in. But I told her what I'd seen the night before, and she said, OK, come on out."

Cautiously, McGuire asked, "How did it happen?"

"Oh, she was in the livingroom, called out for me to come in. She was all straight and nervous, told me to sit down and listen. Then she tried to tell me it wouldn't work, that it was over, all the rest. I got mad, she got scared. It's her gun—or her husband's, I don't know. But she pulled it out of her purse and said, 'Don't threaten me. Leave me alone and get out!'" His lower lip twitching, Hetherton blinked several times. "I was mad. I took it away from her and carried her upstairs, on my shoulder. When I dumped her

on the bed I must have let go of the gun, because the next thing I knew, she had it in her hand and I fought her for it and . . . and it went off."

"Why didn't you call the police and report it?"

"Come on, Mr. McGuire—you oughta know better than that. They'd never believe I didn't mean to kill her. They'd lock me up forever. Uh-uh." He shook his head decisively. "And that's why I gotta kill you, too. I'm sorry, but—"

"Right, spare me the sympathy." Those of Hetherton's thoughts that filtered past McGuire's block were beginning to sicken him. The boy was twisted. He believed his own story, but McGuire didn't. Too many blatant sexual images and remembrances were being thrown onto the screen of his mind. He shuddered; the boy's finger tightened on the trigger. "Hey, not here!" he gasped in horror.

"Why not? The sooner—"

"Sure, sure, but—look, Al," he said as rapidly as he could, "once the police check the bullet, they'll know that the same person murdered both Mrs. Cjaka and me. And they'll figure it was someone connected with this dining hall, if they find my body here. Cover your traces! Let me lock up here,

and . . . and you can drive me over to East Rock and shoot me there, leave my body in the woods or something. They'll never catch you that way."

"That makes sense," admitted Hetherton, "but why are you trying to help me get away with it? *That's* what don't make sense."

"Um . . ." He searched for a satisfactory excuse. "Well, you see—" he tried to force a nervous laugh and found nervousness came easily, "—I need more time, Al—time to get myself ready, you know? And . . . and I'd like to see stars and smell fresh air one last time—I want to die with a clean taste in my mouth. And I don't want J.J. or anybody else to wind up in the back room of the station, forced to confess to a crime he didn't commit. Do you?"

"No, I guess not, Mr. McGuire. All right, we'll do it your way—but I'm going to have to tie you up before I let you outside. Tie you and gag you."

"OK." Sweat pasted his clothes to his shaking body. "Thanks, Al."

"Yeah. Now hurry up here." He gave a command with the gun.

"OK. I just have to take the temperatures of the refrigerators, and lock them up, and turn off the lights. Then I'll be ready."

Hetherton squeezed into the corner of the landing and waved

McGuire down the stairs. "Go real slow now, OK?"

"Sure, Al, sure." He took each step with care.

"Why do you read the temperatures?" Hetherton asked idly.

"I have to. If the temperature isn't right, then the meat or milk or whatever will spoil. I check it twice a day—at night and in the morning."

"Can't you skip it?"

McGuire, paralyzed for a moment, breathed in relief as the answer came. "Of course not. I *always* do it. If I don't do it on the night I'm mur—on the night I die," he amended, "then the police will start to wonder." He crossed the red tiles to the fenced-in alcove, and slid the wire door back on its runners. "I'll do the freezer first," he said, opening the black insulated top of the three-foot-high box. "The thermometer's down there, I have to stick my head in." *Stop babbling, he warned himself, or you'll give it away.*

"Fine. Just remember, I'm right behind you."

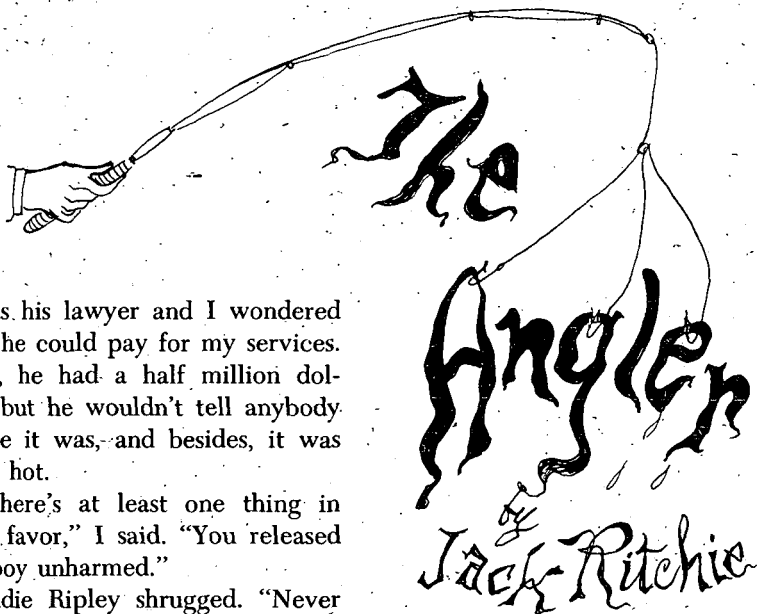
"Uh-huh. How could I forget?"

Fear grabbed him. Was Hetherton in the right position? Was it in there? Was— The fear felt good, and as he rummaged through the frost-covered packages he let it build for one second before he opened the valve wide and let high-pressure terror buffet the unsuspecting teen-ager, who jerked convulsively as awareness of danger exploded in his mind. He swiveled to face the staircase, the only approach for any conceivable danger except that which was beside him. McGuire hefted the frozen salami and swung it in a vicious arc that terminated abruptly on Hetherton's left temple. The boy went down; the gun clattered against the wire wall of the cage; McGuire leaped for the gun and a second later stood, panting and chest heaving, over the inert ex-football player.

Damn . . . it came in handy again. If it hadn't been for the telepathy, Hetherton could have—but then, if it hadn't been for— He shook his head in disgust and went to call Anatoli.



Fishing appears to be a livelihood for more souls than official statistics reveal.



I was his lawyer and I wondered how he could pay for my services. True, he had a half million dollars, but he wouldn't tell anybody where it was, and besides, it was quite hot.

"There's at least one thing in your favor," I said. "You released the boy unharmed."

Eddie Ripley shrugged. "Never touched a hair of his head. I was going to let him go after a while even if his father didn't come across with the ransom. Why would I want to hurt a kid? I like kids."

Two weeks ago, Eddie had kidnapped twelve-year-old Frankie Sorrenson and demanded and gotten \$500,000. When the police caught him, they had found no money on him or in his vicinity

and he refused to tell them where he had hidden it.

"I think the kid enjoyed the whole thing," Eddie said. "I got him all the comic books he wanted, he had my portable TV, and no school. He probably gained a couple of pounds while he was with me because I fed him real good. Ice cream, pop, hamburgers. The whole bit."

"What about the father?" I asked. "Do you suppose he enjoyed the entire incident too?"

Eddie snorted. "The kid told me plenty. His old man hardly knew he was alive. Frankie's been with nursemaids and stuff like that since his mother died, when he was two."

Frankie's father, Gus Sorrenson, controlled the state's largest construction company and also, it was generally agreed, a considerable number of county supervisors. Consequently our state is laced with his highways, a great number of which seem to be superfluous.

When his son was kidnapped, he had immediately announced that he would not be intimidated. He would refuse to pay the ransom. If he yielded to the kidnapper's demand, it would only encourage other kidnappers across the country.

Ten percent of our population applauded his courageous stand. The other ninety percent wrote letters to newspapers intimating a certain heartlessness on his part. After ten days—and considerable negative publicity—he capitulated and paid the ransom.

Eddie Ripley brushed back his prematurely gray hair. "You know why I hired you? Because you got a reputation. I hear they tried to disbar you three times."

"Misunderstandings," I said. "No one could prove a thing." I changed the subject. "There is still the question of the ransom money. The police haven't found it and apparently you have no intention of telling them where to look."

"That's right."

I shook my head. "Eddie, you'll never get a chance to spend a cent of it. No matter what I do for you, you're a cinch to get at least life imprisonment."

He grinned. "I'll be eligible for parole in twelve years and eight months."

"Forget the parole. Do you think any parole board is going to turn you loose if that \$500,000 is still missing?"

Eddie shrugged. "I guess not. So I'll play it cool for three, four years. Put in good time until I get out of maximum security. I broke out of the pen twice before, you know."

Ripley was certainly an optimist. Yet it was quite true that he had, in his career, escaped from state confinement two times. "The police have the serial numbers of all those bills. And probably the money is marked in other ways too. If you try spending it, even ten or fifteen years from now, you'll be nailed in a week."

He agreed. "But I know where to get rid of it."

"At an eighty or ninety percent discount?"

"No. Dollar for dollar. Or nearly so."

"A Swiss bank? Things aren't quite what they were, Eddie. They wouldn't take a cent of it."

"Not a Swiss bank. I mean one of those islands in the Caribbean that are all turning into republics. What holds them together is the tourist business and the world banks that suddenly open branch offices there. Them banks don't give a damn where the money comes from, just so they get it. They know how to launder it and get it back into circulation on the other side of the world with only a small discount."

He leaned a bit closer. "I was going to take it there myself, but something went sour with the caper and right away the cops were looking for me. I didn't stand a chance of getting out of the country. So I buried the money. In five places."

"Five places? Why five places?"

"Because I don't trust nobody. I put \$100,000 in each hole." He smiled. "Do you know anybody who'd like to make \$100,000 easy?"

I coughed slightly and waited.

He lowered his voice, though it was not necessary. We were alone in the small room at police head-

quarters. "Suppose I tell somebody where one of those holes is? And suppose this somebody took the money he found there to one of them islands and deposited \$80,000 in a bank where I could get at it when I was ready and he could deposit \$20,000 in his own name. And suppose he came back with the proof that he done just that? Then I guess I'd tell him where to find the second hole, and so forth, until we run out of holes."

I listened to my thoughts for a moment. "Why not tell this person where *all* of the holes are? It would save a lot of traveling back and forth to the island."

He smiled again. "Because I wouldn't trust this person as far as I could throw a lead habeas corpus. He'd probably take off with the whole half million and leave me with nothing but tears."

I displayed an understanding nod. "Suppose this unmentioned person should take off with *all* of the hundred thousand he found in the first hole? He could save himself five trips to the island, and a hundred thousand one way appears to be as good as a hundred thousand another."

"Because if he did that, I'd blow the whistle on him. I'd tell the cops he's got some of the ransom money. I might even say that

he was my accomplice. But if he does things my way, the hundred thou he ends up with is clean and spendable. Nobody knows where or how he got it."

I diddled with the clasp of my briefcase for a few moments. "The unnamed person in question will need a little time to think over the proposition. And to see if it can be done."

When I left Eddie, I stopped in at the district attorney's office and talked to Assistant D.A. Porter, who would handle the prosecution.

He did not overwhelm me with hospitality. "Is Ripley going to tell us where to find the money?"

I took an unoffered chair. "Not yet, at least. I suppose you've done some searching?"

"Every place we could think of. He probably buried it somewhere, and this is a big country."

"You went over his apartment?"

"Of course. We even looked up his ex-wife."

"Ex-wife?"

"Yeah. They've been divorced over five years, but you never can tell. For \$500,000 they might get together for one hit. But nothing turned up. She even volunteered for a lie detector test. Our graph man says she doesn't know anything about the kidnapping or the money. She says she never sees

Eddie more than a few minutes when he comes to pick up the kid on Sunday afternoons."

"The kid?"

"He has a boy about the same age as the Sorrenson kid. He gets to keep his son two weeks in the summer too. All part of the divorce arrangement. His ex-wife says Eddie wasn't much of a husband, but he's crazy about his kid."

Early the next morning, Gus Sorrenson appeared at my office. He's a heavy man with small eyes that glared at me. "So you're defending the kidnapper of my son?"

I corrected him. "I am defending the *alleged* kidnapper of your son."

He brushed that off. "I suppose you're wondering why I'm here?"

"Naturally."

"I might as well get right to the point. I understand that this Ripley character has refused to turn the ransom money over to the police."

"Quite true."

Sorrenson sputtered. "What the hell good will the money do him now? He's not going to be in circulation again for a long, long time, if ever. His only chance for a parole is to turn over the money right now."

"I pointed that out to him. But

he wants to hang on to it anyway. Maybe the thought of still having it will keep him warm in the dismal years ahead."

Sorrenson glowered. "I had a hell of a time raising that cash. A hell of a time. Had to turn in bonds. Sign notes. The cops swore up and down that I'd get it all back. Every cent of it."

"Obviously they were wrong."

He leaned forward. "Let's not beat around the bush. I know when to cut my losses. I'm ready to make a deal."

"A deal?"

"That's right. If Ripley turns over \$400,000 of that money, I'll let him keep the rest."

"I don't quite see what he has to gain by that."

"Look, I'll tell the police that I got *all* of the ransom back. That way the hundred thousand Ripley keeps will be clean. Nobody will be looking for the bills. Hell, he could have it invested for him and it could double or triple by the time he's eligible for parole. He'll be a rich man when he gets out."

Sorrenson managed a wink. "I don't care how the two of you decide to split the hundred grand. Fifty-fifty, or whatever you think is fair to your client."

I mulled it over. It was true that if I went along with Ripley, I would wind up with a big

\$100,000. But there was always the possibility that something might go wrong and I would inherit more trouble than I could possibly handle.

Doing things Sorrenson's way, I'd manage maybe only fifty grand, but it would put me on the side of the angels—which was considerably safer.

I smiled. "I'll see what I can do, Mr. Sorrenson, I'll see what I can do."

The next morning, I put the offer to Ripley—or at least my version of it. "So Sorrenson will let you keep fifty grand of the ransom money, if you return the rest. It will be a clean fifty grand, Eddie. Just lying there in a bank and making money for you to spend when you get out. And you'll undoubtedly get that parole when you become eligible."

Eddie wasn't buying. "Hell, no."

I cleared my throat. "I just might be able to get Sorrenson to up the offer to sixty grand." I watched his face hopefully. "Maybe even sixty-five. But that's the absolute limit, Eddie. I don't think he'll go for more."

Ripley glared. "Not for fifty grand, a hundred grand, or two hundred grand. I'm going to wind up with \$400,000 and not a cent less." He studied me as though he

had decided to get himself another lawyer. "And somebody else is going to pocket a hundred thousand, but I haven't decided who yet."

"Good," I said quickly. "Good."

He frowned. "Good what?"

"I mean I am considerably happy that you turned down Sorrenson's offer. I was hoping you would. Really, Eddie. But I had to pass it on to you. That's ethics, Eddie—to let you decide for yourself what you want to do. You made a wise decision. A wise decision." I shifted a little in the hard wooden chair. "About depositing that first hundred grand, Eddie. Don't you think we ought to begin just about now?"

He remained dubious. "Not yet. I got to know you a little better."

That night in my apartment I made myself a long drink. I wasn't too enthusiastic about five island trips. Not that I didn't think Ripley's plan would work, but there was always that element of risk in handling hot money.

Then I brightened.

Suppose that after I told Sorrenson that Ripley had turned down his offer cold, I mentioned Ripley's counter-offer to me—the hundred thousand in each pot thing. And I would suggest that I *pretend* to go along with Ripley. For a cut of \$100,000, of course.

It was the only way Sorrenson could expect to get his money back.

Sorrenson and I could even get police cooperation. They could manufacture the bankbook or whatever Ripley required as proof that his money was being put into the island banks.

My apartment door buzzer sounded.

I opened the door and stared into the face of a burly man wearing a black domino mask. He held a blued automatic in his gloved hand.

I backed up, as directed by the gesture of the gun. He entered and closed the door behind him.

His hair was quite flaming red, and he had an inch-long scar on the left side of his cleft chin.

He spoke. "I read about you in the papers. You're Eddie Ripley's lawyer, right?"

Was it best to admit or deny it? Which did he want? "Well, at the present moment, I am. However, if there should be any objection from anyone . . ."

"You get to see him whenever you want to?"

"Yes. So far, at least."

He seemed satisfied. "Relax. I'm not after you. I hear he's still holding onto that half million."

I nodded.

The red-haired man sat down.

His gloved left hand fished a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He lit up from a book of matches. "I want that five hundred grand," he said. "All of it."

"I assume you expect to get it. Why?"

"Because I got Eddie Ripley's son."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

He exhaled smoke. "What Eddie can do, I can do. So Ripley kidnapped the Sorrenson kid and got \$500,000, and now I kidnap Eddie's kid and I expect to get five hundred grand too. From Ripley. I come here because you get in to see Eddie regular and can communicate."

I blinked. Kidnapping a kidnapper's son somehow just didn't seem cricket. Yet, apparently it had been done.

The red-haired man continued. "This whole thing is just between you and me and Eddie. I don't want nobody running to the police."

I was still in a bit of shock. "What about the boy's mother? Won't she bring in the police?"

"No," he said emphatically. "I impressed on her that I would send back the kid piece by piece if she did. Starting with the left ear."

I shuddered. This creature wanted the *entire* \$500,000? Ut-

terly unreasonable. Perhaps something could be salvaged for later distribution between me and Sorrenson.

"Eddie might love his son," I said. "But \$500,000 worth?" I chuckled. "You and I, sir, are reasonable men. Eddie's love undoubtedly has its limit, which I would estimate at \$100,000. Even then, I feel sure it would be like pulling teeth."

He smiled. "Speaking of teeth, I'll send those back too, one by one, after I run out of ears. I want the whole five hundred grand or it's D-day for the kid."

D-day? Dismemberment Day? Clearly the man was a monster. One cannot haggle with monsters, and yet . . .

I cleared my throat. "Of course you realize that this money is all marked. Attempting to spend it will be hazardous to your health. However—for a slight consideration—I could suggest a place where—"

He interrupted. "I know where to launder the money. And I'll be getting a suntan and drinking rum and cola when I do."

So he knew about those island banks? Damn.

I needed time to think, to plan something else that would not leave my pockets empty. "Assuming that Ripley will agree to pay

the ransom, there will still be some difficulty in gathering all of the money together. Eddie has buried it in five different places. He hasn't told me where, of course, but I gather that the spots are far apart. I might have to do considerable traveling to assemble the entire amount. It might take weeks."

"You got one week," he said. "One week or I buy myself stamps and start mailing things."

"How will I get in touch with you?"

"I'll do the touching. By phone."

When he left, I bolted the door.

Carefully I retrieved the matchbook he'd left behind, handling it only by its edges.

It was a typical twenty-match pack, advertising a national chain of supermarkets on the cover, but twelve of the matches had been used. The red-haired man had worn gloves when he lit up here, but I doubted that he had worn gloves when he had used the pack in lighting any of those missing matches.

I slipped it into an envelope and drove to the suburban home of Sergeant Ben Luther.

Luther appeared at the door in slippers, carrying a can of beer. He smiled when he saw me. It meant business for him—unofficial

business for which he expected to be paid.

I handed him the envelope. "There's a pack of matches in there. I want it gone over for fingerprints and I want to find out who they belong to."

"How do you know he's been printed anywhere?"

"I don't. But try anyway."

He took the envelope. "I'm not in fingerprints, and it's not so easy to ask favors like that at headquarters. I might have to lay out a few bucks here and there, but I think fifty will cover it."

Sheer robbery, of course, but I handed him five tens. "I want a rush job. Call me as soon as you get anything."

I went to see Eddie Ripley early the next morning. He paled when I told him about the kidnapping of his son.

"My advice to you," I said, "is to offer him \$100,000. There's no point in shooting the whole works if we . . . if *you* don't have to."

Eddie did not agree at all. "This is nothing to dicker about. The kid could get killed. Give the man the whole damn five hundred grand. I'm beginning to think I never would get to spend it anyhow. They're making jails a lot tighter than they used to."

He wagged a warning finger at me. "If anything happens to that

kid, I'm holding you personally responsible. And if you try to take off and leave that kid in the lurch, I swear I'll get out and kill you, no matter where you run."

"My dear sir," I said indignantly. "The boy's welfare is my concern too. I could not rest another night if he were harmed in any manner."

Ripley proceeded to reveal to me where he had hidden the money. He had memorized the directions, of course, but they were quite complicated and it was necessary for me to put them down on paper. Each cache was located in a lightly populated rural area where there was little danger of anyone questioning why you were digging.

It required two days for me to find and dig up all of the money.

When I reached my apartment, I bolted the door and spread the currency on my dining room table. I counted it. Yes, it was all there. Exactly \$500,000 in \$100 bills.

I found my pulse pounding as I stared at the stacks of money—all of it ripe for the taking.

Was it worthwhile, becoming a fugitive for \$500,000? Was it worthwhile giving up my present identity, my contacts, my practice?

I rubbed my neck. Actually I

do very little repeat business. My clients seem to feel that dealing with me once is quite enough.

Was it worthwhile giving up all the things I had here for \$500,000 uneroded by income taxes?

Frankly, yes.

I sighed heavily. Unfortunately my lack of conscience contained an Achilles heel—I entertain a certain respect for the lives of children. Money was one thing; but I could not live with the responsibility of a boy's death, especially if it were accomplished ear by ear, tooth by tooth, and whatever.

My phone rang.

It was Sergeant Luther. "There were two pretty good prints on the matchbook. Thumb and forefinger, and we had them in the local files. Your man is Gaylord Bysshe Brettschneider. Six foot, two hundred pounds. Scar on cleft chin. Red hair. His record shows armed robbery. Been put away twice. Right now he's out on parole."

"I know."

"He lives right here in the city—167 North Bark Street."

When I hung up, my mind churned once again. Perhaps I had another angle to work on.

Ripley would have to pay the ransom, of course. But as soon as the boy was released safely, I would go to the police and tell

them where to find the kidnapper. They would arrest Brettschneider and recover the money.

I paused. What would that do for me?

There was no official reward for its return and I couldn't count on Sorrenson's generosity to offer one voluntarily after the fact of recovery, so to speak.

No, I would have to see Sorrenson first and get an ironclad agreement—in writing—to insure that I would get \$100,000 of the ransom, no matter how or by whom it was recovered—just as long as it was.

I phoned the Sorrenson Construction Company for an appointment, but Sorrenson's secretary informed me that he was out of town for the weekend and she didn't know where.

I cradled the phone and decided I might just as well see where that redheaded monster lived.

I packed the money into a suitcase and took it with me down to the car. After all, I didn't want some burglar stumbling into a bonanza while I was gone.

Brettschneider's address, 167 North Bark Street, proved to be a Victorian structure in an old residential neighborhood gone to seed. It had apparently been cut up into apartments.

I made a turn at the end of the block, with the intention of coming back for a closer look, but then I quickly pulled to the curb and parked.

Ahead of me a somewhat battered sedan drew up in front of the address. A large, flaming-haired man got out of the driver's side of the car.

It was unmistakably Gaylord Bysshe Brettschneider.

The passenger side of the car opened too, and a small red-haired boy of about ten hopped out. He wore a baseball glove and the two of them tossed a ball back and forth a few times before they disappeared into the house. I noticed that the boy limped rather badly on his right foot.

So Brettschneider had a son too? Obviously the two of them were close; a typical warm relationship between father and son.

A new and startling idea formed in my mind.

There had already been two kidnappings, why couldn't there be *three*?

After Ripley paid the ransom and his boy was released, why couldn't I strike out for myself and kidnap the Brettschneider kid? All I needed was a dozen comic books, a portable TV, a place to confine the redheaded kid, and I was in business.

Certainly Brettschneider would pay the \$500,000 if he loved his boy at all, and every cent of it would be mine. Best of all, Brettschneider could hardly go to the police to complain.

I drove home in high spirits.

I made myself a large drink and recounted the money.

Naturally I wouldn't harm a hair of the kid's head, but I'd have to tell Brettschneider that if the ransom weren't paid, I would disassemble the boy, item by item. The mere suggestion should jolt his imagination enough so that he would be more than eager to pay.

I took a deep drink.

Of course Brettschneider would be worried sick about the kid. So would the boy's mother, and he probably had one.

What about the boy himself? I would assure him that I meant him no harm, but would he believe me? Would he, instead, be utterly terrified?

How does one deal with a terrified boy? Was I justified in traumatizing his little psyche for the sake of a rotten \$500,000?

I brooded through three more drinks before I was forced to accept the fact that I just couldn't go through with it. Kidnapping wasn't my kind of action. I would probably bungle it somehow anyway.

I sighed heavily. I would have to go back to Sorrenson and see what kind of a deal I could squeeze out of him.

I made my fifth drink, another double.

After the Ripley kid was returned, I would inform the police of Brettschneider's whereabouts. They would descend upon him and cart him off to prison for at least twelve years and eight months—just when his kid needed him the most.

I blew my nose. The kid had a bad limp. Was that why Brettschneider turned to crime? Did the kid need some kind of a corrective operation? An expensive operation? By specialists who wouldn't lift a scalpel without money in sight?

Was Brettschneider covered by Blue Cross? Blue Shield? Any type of medical insurance? Probably not.

There was no question about it. This was a cruel world. No matter which way one turned, one hurt someone or lost money.

That red-haired kid reminded me of Tiny Tim—the one in *A Christmas Carol*, of course. He had a bad limp too.

I wiped away the birth of a tear. How did my glass get empty so soon? I poured another.

Wasn't there some way I could

avoid sending Brettschneider to prison and still make a little money?

I woke up the next morning still at the dining room table. I took two aspirin, survived a cold shower, and breakfasted on black coffee before I went to see Ripley.

Naturally the first thing he asked was, "Did you pick up the money?"

I nodded tiredly. "Yes."

"Did the kidnapper get in touch with you again?"

"Not yet. But he will. And I'm sure your boy is still all right."

Ripley stared out of the barred window. "I had big plans for that money, but that's all gone now." He shrugged. "Well, at least Mabel will be out there to take care of the boy. She's getting married again. I guess she still goes for redheads."

"Redheads?"

He indicated his own hair. "Used to be red before it turned."

A sudden mouth-opening thought struck me. "Do you know anybody about six feet tall, two hundred pounds? Cleft chin with a scar on it? And red hair?"

He nodded. "Sounds like you're talking about G.B. Brettschneider. He's the man she's marrying. I met him in the pen and we both

got paroled at the same time. I introduced him to Mabel and I guess things took."

I was shaken. "One more thing. This son of yours, what does he look like?"

"He's twelve, but a little short for his age. Could pass for ten. Red hair. The last time I saw him he was limping. Twisted his ankle sliding into second base. Brettschneider's like a second father to the boy. They get along fine."

I closed my eyes.

The whole damn second kidnapping had been a fake. Ripley's kid never was in danger or would be. It was just a scheme on the part of Brettschneider, and probably Mabel, to pry the ransom money loose from Ripley.

I had been emotionally swindled.

Something else occurred to me too. At this given moment, Ripley did not have the money, Sorrenson did not have the money, and Brettschneider did not have the money—but I did; in a suitcase in my car.

I smiled.

On the way home to pack some of my clothes, I stopped in at a travel agency and picked up several brochures on the Caribbean.

One's ability to shape his own destiny is usually conditioned by self-confidence—but occasionally by self-restraint.

Ego Boost

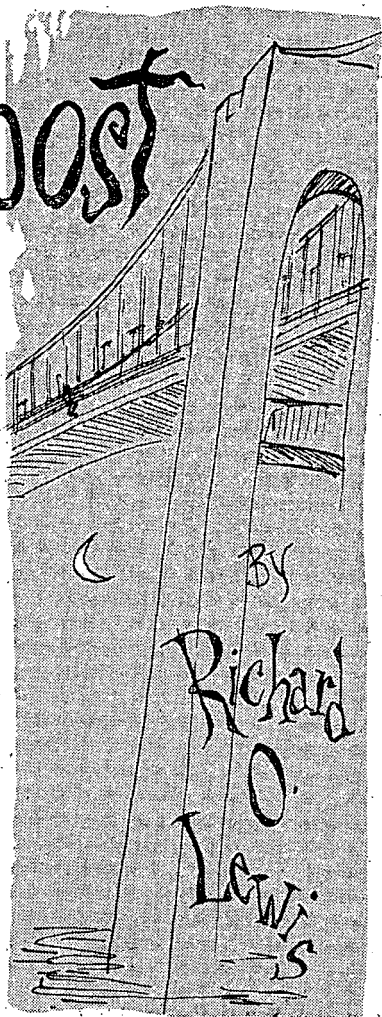
Police Lieutenant DeWitt called me shortly after 8:00 p.m. "Dr. Harper," he said, "I have a customer for you. Picked him off the bridge about a half hour ago. Are you interested?"

Bridge? Then I suddenly remembered one of the things we had been discussing when we had last met. "Oh, sure!" I said. "Of course I'm interested! Tonight?"

"Either that," came the lieutenant's voice, "or I'll have to book him and lock him up till morning. That could make matters worse, you know."

"Definitely!" I agreed. "Better bring him right over."

"I haven't been able to find out much about him," the lieutenant continued, "but I'll give you what I learned so you'll have something to go on. Thirty-five years of age,



an accountant, married, no children, lives in the suburbs, won't give us any reason for his attempt to jump from the bridge. Guess that's it."

"Good enough," I said. "I'll be waiting."

After replacing the telephone, I leaned back in my chair for a moment of reflection. The rate of suicides and attempted suicides had been climbing steadily during the past year. For some reason, a leap from the railing of the high bridge seemed to be the favorite method for ending it all, perhaps because once the leap was made, the point of no return would be reached immediately, and if the person changed his mind on the way down, there was nothing he could do about it. Also, it wasn't messy.

During the past couple of years, Lieutenant DeWitt and I had met at a few social gatherings and had become friends. At our last little get-together, the subject of increasing suicidal attempts had come up and we had both agreed that the present method of treating such cases was wholly inadequate. If a man were emotionally depressed enough to attempt to take his own life, a reprimand from police officers and a threat to deny him his personal freedom could only aggravate the condition, and a jail or station house

was certainly not a desirable place to conduct therapy of a psychological nature, as it were.

As a practicing psychologist, I felt certain that a man-to-man talk with the distressed person in a pleasing environment offered a possible solution for the problem. By utilizing my years of formal training concerning the vagaries of the human mind, it should not be a too difficult task for me to ferret out the underlying cause for the suicidal attempt—bring it out into the light of day, as it were—and lay it by the heels for all time. At least it was better than anything else at hand.

So, with the lieutenant's rather skeptical assent, I had volunteered my services—on a purely experimental basis, of course.

By the time Lieutenant DeWitt arrived and was ushered into my study, along with the man who was destined to be the first experimental case, I had everything in readiness: soft lighting that scarcely reached the book-lined shelves of the walls, a tiny but comforting glow from the gas logs in the fireplace, subdued music—an atmosphere designed to induce relaxation.

Lieutenant DeWitt introduced the man as Bertram Brunell, and as I gave a friendly shake to his unresponsive hand, I noted that

his posture was one of utter dejection. His eyes were downcast and restless, and his lean face, pale from lack of sunshine or outdoor activity, sagged as if holding it together were too much effort.

"I am pleased to know you," I said and indicated an overstuffed chair facing the davenport. "Make yourself comfortable while I show Lieutenant DeWitt out. I'll be right back."

At the door, the lieutenant paused a moment. "Call me as soon as you've finished," he suggested. "I may have to send someone after him, you know."

"Right."

Back in the study, I rubbed my hands warmly together, sat down, and smiled companionably at the man across the low coffee table from me. "Well, Mr. Brunell," I began, deciding to take the direct approach, "it seems that we have a bit of a problem."

Brunell gazed unseeingly at the hands in his lap, the fingers of which were tensely twining and untwining about each other, and said nothing.

"Sometimes when we bring the problem into the open and discuss it, it has a tendency to diminish in stature," I said. "Do you care to tell me about it?"

Brunell's gaze left his nervous fingers, his eyes darting right and

left as if searching for some avenue of escape.

An introvert? Undoubtedly; a man who kept his problems locked up secretly and forever within himself, denying them an outlet, letting the increasing pressure of them mount to the point of final explosion. He had reached that point earlier in the evening, and although he had been restrained from leaping from the bridge, the pressure was still there and running dangerously high.

I got up quickly, went to my liquor cabinet and poured two martinis from the supply I had prepared for the occasion, just in case the necessity arose.

"Here," I said, proffering him one of the long-stemmed glasses. "You'll no doubt find it quite relaxing."

He unlaced his fingers, took the glass in hand, eyed it hesitantly for a moment, then took a sip. Evidently finding the liquor to his liking, he took a long swallow. "I—I don't drink much," he said, his hand trembling slightly as he put the half-emptied glass on the coffee table. "Never have."

It figured. Some men could resort to alcohol in times of stress, go on a binge, flip their lid, and relieve the pressure—for a while, at least—but not Brunell. He just was not the type.

I took a sip from my own drink and resumed my place opposite him. "Sometimes," I said, "we let our problems pile up within us, keep them locked inside, permit them to magnify themselves until they assume such gigantic proportions that they seem insurmountable."

Brunell stared absently at his glass. I hoped he was paying some heed to what I was telling him.

"If we discuss our major difficulty with someone else, bring it out into the open, as it were, we can then view it in an abstract rather than an emotional manner."

Brunell picked up his glass, drained it, and replaced it on the table. He nodded slightly, as if in agreement, but remained silent.

I knew from past endeavors that some people experienced great reluctance when it came to baring their souls to others, even to friends. Yet I had to reach him in some way if I were to save him from himself.

"Sometimes a problem is so personal in nature that it is almost impossible to discuss it openly with a stranger," I said, refilling his glass from the martini supply. "Even so, mere conversation—sympathetic understanding, as it were—can often help one view his difficulties in a more rational environment."

Although Brunell continued to remain silent, I could see by the way he had twisted his head to one side, his brow creased into thoughtful lines, that I had begun to reach him and that he was trying to get things sorted out in his mind.

Finally, he began nodding his head slowly as if he had reached at least a partial understanding of his inner self. "I—I guess I'm just a coward," he breathed.

It was not exactly the response for which I had hoped, but it was better than nothing. I could see now that a major part of his trouble was a deep-seated inferiority complex. He lacked self-confidence, was in desperate need of an ego boost.

"We are all cowards in one way or another," I said. "We all have one or more fears of various kinds—claustrophobia, cardiophobia, airphobia, felinophobia, to name a few—and if we let them dominate our lives, we are in for trouble."

I then proceeded to give him a ten-minute lecture of a therapeutic nature, stressing the importance of human dignity, belief in one's self, and the ability to shape one's destiny. I finished by citing several cases wherein some of my patients had achieved remarkable success under my guidance.

When I had finished, he nodded his head and took a sip from his glass. "I guess you're right," he said.

He was obviously more relaxed now, maybe because he had begun to get things straightened out in his head or because of the liquor, or due to a combination of both. Anyway, I felt that my efforts were beginning to bear fruit.

"I made the mistake of letting things pile up for the past couple of years," he continued, "until tonight when they reached a climax . . ."

"Right," I said. "The final straw that broke the camel's back, as it were. Then, afraid that you did not have the ability to eliminate your difficulty, you chose to eliminate yourself instead."

Brunell focused his gaze on his glass, eyes narrowing.

I decided that now was the time to do more probing. "If you have a definite problem that you would care to discuss with me," I suggested, "something you would like to bring out into the open perhaps . . ."

He shook his head slowly. "No," he said. "You have already helped me see things in a different light. I guess it won't hurt to tell you that I drew out all my savings, cashed in all the assets I could, and was preparing to fly

away to parts unknown. Then I realized that I would still have the problem that would hound me into sleepless nights wherever I went. In desperation, I finally decided to take the easy and final way of complete escape by—well, you know . . ."

"Above all else," I reminded him, "a man must believe in himself!"

Suddenly Brunell tossed off the rest of his liquor and got to his feet, his long, pale face molded into determined lines and his eyes meeting mine for the first time since he had entered the room. "You have done a lot for me," he said, extending his hand, "and I want to thank you. I feel certain that I can shape my own destiny from now on."

"If I have helped you," I said, enjoying the firm clasp of his hand, "that in itself is my reward. And no more bridge jumping. Right?"

"Right."

I phoned Lieutenant DeWitt immediately after Brunell's departure. "Dr. Harper here," I said. "I am happy to report that our first experimental case has been concluded in a highly satisfactory manner."

"Do you want me to pick him up?"

"Not at all. I sent him on his

way in a cab just a few minutes ago, after relaxing him with some drinks and giving him a much-needed ego boost, a strong dose of self-confidence, as it were."

"I see. I must admit that I was a bit skeptical at first." He paused a moment. "You sure he'll be all right?"

"I personally guarantee it. No more bridge jumping. He left here a changed man!"

After cradling the phone, I picked up my book and resumed reading where I had left off earlier. I must have read for a full two hours and was considering going to bed when the phone came suddenly to life. I scooped it up. "Dr. Harper here," I said.

"You may have given your patient too much of an ego boost." It was the voice of Lieutenant DeWitt. "Or too much liquor. Or both."

"Why?" I gasped. "Surely Brunell didn't go back to the bridge and jump?"

"We don't know yet. We can't find him. We've been searching for him everywhere, including the river, for the past hour."

"I don't understand . . ."

"The manager of a motel at the edge of town reported hearing shots in one of his units a little more than an hour ago. When we investigated, we found the bullet-riddled body of Mrs. Brunell, along with the mutilated body of what had obviously been her boyfriend. Naturally, we're looking for Brunell."

That revelation left me stunned for a moment. Then I suddenly remembered what Brunell had said about having cashed in all his assets, and the answer became crystal-clear. "Well, you needn't search in the river anymore," I said. "Right now, Brunell is undoubtedly on his way to parts unknown with his life's savings in his pocket."

"Thanks a lot!" There was a sharp click as DeWitt broke the connection.

I gazed thoughtfully at the silent telephone for a moment or two. Well, my psychological approach to the patient's difficulties had not been a *total* failure, I reasoned. Brunell, it seemed, had at least solved a couple of his problems in a very direct and decisive manner, as it were.



Perhaps the only way to get around the rules and regulations is to know the right people.



Each of us lives in one world only," Mrs. Cappelli said, "the singular world within the skull. No two are alike. Who can possibly imagine some of the dark phantasms within the worlds other than one's own?"

Isadora, old, gray, spindly, gnarled, more friend and companion than servant, drifted to Mrs. Cappelli's side. The two women

were of an age, in the autumn of their lives, with a close bond between them. The years had touched Mrs. Cappelli with the gentler brush. She was still trim; her face had not entirely surrendered its youthful lines; her once-black hair was braided in a coil atop her head, a silver tiara.

The two stood at the window of Mrs. Cappelli's slightly disarrayed



by Talmage Powell

and comfortably lived-in bedroom and looked from the second-story window at the youth in the back yard of the house next door.

"A strange one," Isadora agreed.

He was lounging on a plastic-webbing chaise, indolent, loose, relaxed, calmly pumping a pellet rifle. In scruffy jeans and T-shirt, he was long, tanned and lean, slightly bony. Even in repose he was a suggestion of quick, whip-like agility and power. His face was cleanly cut, even attractive, his forehead, ears and neck feathered with very dark hair. Idly, his gaze was roving the bushes and

trees, the pines at the corners of the yard, the avocado tree, the two tall, unkempt palmettos.

He lifted the gun with a casual motion and squeezed the trigger. A bird toppled from the topmost reaches of the taller pine tree, the small body bouncing from limb to limb, showering a few needles, hanging briefly on a lower limb before it struck and was swallowed by the uncut grass along the rear of the yard.

The youth showed no sign of interest, once again pumping the gun and stirring only his eyes in a renewed search of the trees:

Mrs. Cappelli's thin figure flinched, and her eyes were held by the spot where the bird had fallen.

Isadora touched her arm. "At least it wasn't a cardinal, Maria."

"Thank you, Isadora. From this distance the details weren't clear. My eyes just aren't what they used to be."

Isadora glanced at the face that had once been the distillation of all beauty in Old Sicily. "I think we could use some tea, Maria."

Mrs. Cappelli seemed unaware when Isadora faded from her side. She remained at the window, as hushed as the hot Florida stillness outside, looking carefully at the young man on the chaise.

Mrs. Cappelli had been de-

lighted when the house next door was rented at last. It had stood vacant for months, a casualty of Florida overbuild. Dated by its Spanish styling, it was nevertheless a sound and comfortable house in a substantial and quiet older neighborhood where urban decay had never gained the slightest foothold.

Mrs. Cappelli had expected a family. Instead there were only the mother and son arriving in a noisy old car in the wake of a van that had disgorged flimsy, worn, time-payment furniture. Mrs. Ruth Morrow and Greg. A lot of house for two people, but Mrs. Cappelli supposed, correctly, that the age of the house and its long vacancy had finally caused the desperate owner to offer it as a cut-rate bargain on the sagging rental market.

After a settling-in day or two, Mrs. Cappelli saw Mrs. Morrow pruning the dying poinsettia near the front corner of the house and went over to say hello.

It was a sultry afternoon and Mrs. Morrow looked wan and tired, with hardly enough remaining strength to snap the shears. Mrs. Cappelli wondered why Greg wasn't handling the pruning tool. He was at home. Who could doubt it? He was in there torturing a high-amplification guitar with amateurish violence. His dis-

cordant efforts were audible a block away.

"I'm Maria Cappelli," Mrs. Cappelli said pleasantly. "It's very nice to have new neighbors."

Mrs. Morrow accepted the greeting with hesitant and standoffish self-consciousness. Her glance slipped toward the house, a silent wish that her son would turn down his guitar. She was a thin, almost frail woman. She needs, Mrs. Cappelli thought, mounds of pasta and huge bowls of steaming, mouth-watering *stufato*.

Mrs. Morrow remembered her manners with a tired smile. "Ruth Morrow," she said. She glanced about the yard. "So much to do here. Inside, the place was all dust and cobwebs." Her gaze moved to Mrs. Cappelli's comfortable abode of stucco and red tile. "You have a lovely place."

"My husband built it years before his death. We used to come here for winter vacations. To me, it was home, rather than New York. I love Florida, even the heat of the summers. My son was born in the house, right up there in that corner bedroom." Mrs. Cappelli laughed. "Shortest labor on record. Such a bambino! When he decided to make his entrance, he wouldn't even take time for a ride to the hospital."

Mrs. Cappelli's unconscious delight in her son brought Ruth Morrow's fatigued and hollow eyes to Mrs. Cappelli's face. Mrs. Cappelli was caught, held, and slightly embarrassed. Such aching eyes! So many regrets, frustrations and bewilderments harbored in their depths . . . They were too large and dark for the thin, heavily made-up face that at one time must have been quite pretty.

"My son is named Greg," Mrs. Morrow murmured.

"Mine is named John. He's much older than your son. He has a wife and five children—such scamps!—and he comes to see me now and then when he can take the time. He is a contractor up north, always on the go."

"He must be a fine man."

Mrs. Cappelli was urged to say something comforting to the wearied mother before her. "Oh, John sowed an oat. I guess they all do, before they settle down. Nowadays John is always after me to sell the old antique, as he calls the house. Come and live with him, he nags. I tell him to peddle his own papers. This is not the old country where three or four generations must brawl under one small roof."

Mrs. Morrow nodded. "It's been real nice of you to say hello, Mrs. Cappelli. I do have to run now. I

work, you see. At the Serena Lounge on the beach, from six in the evening until two o'clock each morning. I always have a good bit to do to get ready for work."

"The Serena is an excellent place. John took Isadora and me there the last time he was down."

Ruth Morrow punched the tip of the pruning shears at a small brown twig. "Being a cocktail waitress isn't the height of my ambition, but without professional training, it pays more money than I'd ever hoped to make. And God knows there is never quite enough money."

It might ease the situation, Mrs. Cappelli mused, if her boy dirtied his hands with some honest toil. She said, "The honor of a job is in its execution, and I'm certain you're the best of cocktail waitresses."

The sincerity of Mrs. Cappelli's tone brought the first touch of animation to the tired face with its layered icing of makeup and framing of short, dark brown hair. Before Mrs. Morrow could respond, the front door of the house slammed, and Greg was standing in the shadow of the small portico. Both women looked toward him.

"Greg," Mrs. Morrow called, "this is Mrs. Cappelli, our next-door neighbor."

"Hi," he said, bored. He gave Mrs. Cappelli a single glance of dismissal, dropped to the walk with a single smooth stride and headed around the house.

"Greg," Ruth Morrow called, "where are you going?"

"Out," he said, without looking back.

"When will you be home?"

"When I'm damned good and ready!" He rounded the corner of the house and was out of sight.

Mrs. Morrow's face came creeping in Mrs. Cappelli's direction, but her eyes sidled away. "It's just his way of talking, Mrs. Cappelli."

Mrs. Cappelli nodded, but she didn't understand. How could Mrs. Morrow accept it? Parental respect was normal in a child, be he six or sixty.

A car engine was stabbed to roaring life and Greg raced down the driveway. He cornered the car into the street with tires screaming.

"I really have to go now, Mrs. Cappelli."

"It was a privilege to meet you," Mrs. Cappelli said.

"Well?" Isadora asked as soon as Mrs. Cappelli stepped into the house.

"She is a poor woman in the worst of all states," Mrs. Cappelli said, "a mother with a cruel and unloving son."

Isadora crossed herself.

"He is killing his mother," Mrs. Cappelli said.

Greg was an immediate neighborhood blight, a disease, an invasion. The Ransoms' playful puppy bounded into the Morrow yard and Greg broke its leg with a kick, claiming that the flopped-eared trusting mutt was charging him. He hunted chords on the thunderous guitar at one o'clock in the morning, if the mood suited him. Many evenings he was out, usually returning about three a.m. with screaming tires and unmuffled engine. Frequently he filled the Morrow house with hordes of hippies for beer and rock parties.

Neighbors grumbled and swapped irate opinions of Greg among themselves over back-yard fences and coffee klatches. Lack of leadership was a stultifying, inertial force, and nothing was done about Greg until about two, one morning, when the biggest blast yet hit the peak of its frenzy in the Morrow house.

Mr. Sigmon (the white colonial across the street) decided he just couldn't stand it any longer. He threw back the cover, sat up in bed, turned on the bedside lamp, and dialed Information on his extension phone. Yes, Information informed, a phone had been in-

stalled at the Morrow address. Mr. Sigmon got the number, hesitated for a single minute, then dialed it.

The Morrow phone rang six or seven times before anyone noticed. Then a girl answered, giggling drunkenly. "If this isn't an obscene call, forget it."

"Let me speak to Greg," Mr. Sigmon said, the phone feeling sweaty in his hand.

The girl screeched for Greg, and he was on.

"Have a heart," Mr. Sigmon pleaded. "Can't you tone things down just a little?"

"Who's this?" Greg asked.

"I . . . uh . . . Mr. Sigmon, across the street."

"How'd you like a fat lip, Mr. Sigmon-across-the-street?"

"Now look, Greg . . ." Mr. Sigmon gathered his courage. "All I'm asking is that you be reasonable."

"Go cram it!"

A burst of anger burned the edges from Mr. Sigmon's timidity. "Now look here, you young pup, you quiet down over there or I'll call the police."

For a moment there was only the noise of the party on the line, the wild laughter, the shouted talk, the overpowering background of hard-rock rhythm. Then Greg said, "Well, OK, pops. You don't have to get so sore about

it. We're just having some fun."

The party cooled and Mr. Sigmon stretched beside his wide-awake wife with a feeling of being an inch taller for having put a tether on Greg.

Two days later Mrs. Sigmon got out of her station wagon with a bag of groceries, crossed to the front stoop, and dropped the groceries with a thud and clatter. She put her knuckles to her mouth and screamed. Against the front door lay her cat, stiff and lifeless, its head twisted so that its muzzle pointed upward away from the shoulders.

That night Greg hosted another party, the loudest one yet.

To Mrs. Cappelli it was as if a dark presence had come among them. It wasn't the same warmly quiet old street. It was like a sinister urban street where the aura urged the hapless pedestrian to hurry along after dark with ears keened for the slightest sound.

"Perhaps the Morrows will move on," Mrs. Cappelli said at breakfast.

"Yes," Isadora agreed. "They are Gypsies. But when? That's the question. Next month? A year from now? Before the youth does something even more dreadful?"

"That poor mother." Mrs. Cappelli flipped an egg in the pan. "If she moved around the world,

she would not have room for her problem."

Later in the day Mrs. Cappelli carried her afternoon tea up to her bedroom. She put the steaming cup on a small table and crossed to the side window. Outside, on a level with the sill, was a small wooden ledge. Two sparrows were hopping about on it, pecking bits of food from cracks.

"Hello there," Mrs. Cappelli said, "you're early for dinner. You must be hungry, going for those leftovers."

She turned to the bureau and picked up a canister. The sparrows fluttered away as she opened the canister and reached out to spread a feast of seeds and crumbs on the ledge feeder.

The sparrows had returned by the time Mrs. Cappelli fetched her tea and settled in the wooden rocking chair near the window. Other birds arrived, more sparrows, a robin, a thrush, a tiny wren. They were a delight of movement, color; they were so naturally happy, so easy to please.

The daily bird feeding and watching was silly, perhaps—the whim of an old woman—but the birds rewarded Mrs. Cappelli with a quiet pleasure in a sometimes endless day. Therefore, she inquired of herself, isn't it a most important thing?

She wondered if the Prince would come; and then he did. Gorgeous. Regal. The most beautiful cardinal since Audubon. He had been a daily visitor a long time now. He always came to rest on the edge of the feeder, proud head lifted and tilted as he looked in at Mrs. Cappelli.

She leaned forward slightly. "Hello there," she said softly. "Is the food up to your kingly taste today?"

She couldn't quite delight in the words or in the sight of Prince and his friends. No, not anymore. She sat back, fingers curled on the arms of the chair. Today, more than yesterday or the day before, she was aware of depleted joy. She'd tried not to admit the awareness, but now, in the ritual of the birds, was a hint of anxiety, even fear in her heart. She couldn't entirely free her mind of the memory of the youth next-door with his pellet gun. Pump, pump, pump . . . His strong hand working the lever while his eyes roamed the trees for an innocent, unsuspecting and helpless target, and a feathered body twisting and turning as it plunged headlong to the ground.

Perhaps, Mrs. Cappelli thought, she should stop feeding the birds while the air gun is over there threatening them . . .

As the thought crossed her mind, she saw a sudden puff of red feathers on the cardinal's breast. The bird was gone. That quickly. That completely. The other birds scattered in sudden flight.

Mrs. Cappelli sat with a hot dryness blinding her eyes, then she snapped from the chair and hurried down through the house. With late sun searing through the cold film on her flesh, she searched along the driveway and through the shrubbery growing against the house. The cardinal's body was not to be seen, and she was sure that Greg had run over and picked up the evidence before she'd got out of the house.

She thought of him watching the ledge, seeing her birds, hearing the sound of her, perhaps, drifting from her open window as she'd chatted at the cardinal. A dark instinct had risen in him, a hunger, and his devious mind with its unknown depths had schemed. He'd waited, like a beast savoring the anticipation of the kill. Then he'd felt the thrill of pulling the trigger at last and seeing the cardinal fall.

Mrs. Cappelli turned slowly, and he was there, standing near the front walk of the Morrow house, the air gun in the crook of his arm. Tall. Lean. Young. Chal-

lenging her. Baiting her. His lips lifting in a smile that sent an icy shard through her.

She turned on stiff legs and went into her house.

The policeman's name was Longstreet, Sergeant Harley Longstreet. He was tall, strapping, with a pleasantly big-featured face and lank brown hair.

With the drapery pulled aside in the livingroom, Mrs. Cappelli watched him come from the Morrow house. He stood a moment, looking over his shoulder, a loose-leaf pocket notebook in his hand. Then he came across to the Cappelli front door.

Mrs. Cappelli opened the door while he was still a few feet away and stood aside for him to enter. With a glance at his face, she suspected that he hadn't been very successful with Greg Morrow. He was a nice young policeman. He'd responded quickly to her phone call. He'd heard everything she'd had to say. He hadn't thought a bird's death unimportant—not when it was coupled with the circumstances. He'd attached considerable meaning and importance to it. He had gone over to the Morrow place almost an hour ago. Now he was back.

Mrs. Cappelli stood with her fingers on the edge of the opened door. "I think I understand, Mr.

Longstreet," she said with no accusation or rancor.

"He simply denies killing the bird, ma'am. Did you actually see him kill it?"

"I didn't see him pull the trigger."

"Well, you see, Mrs. Cappelli, the law is black print on white paper. Mrs. Morrow isn't home. No one else is out and about the houses close by. Without a witness or some tangible evidence I've done about all I can."

"I appreciate that, Mr. Longstreet."

He hesitated, tapping his notebook on his thumb. "He says you are a crotchety old lady who doesn't want young people in the neighborhood."

"He's a liar, Mr. Longstreet. I delight in reasonably normal young people. Do you believe him?"

"Not for a moment, Mrs. Cappelli. Not one word." He flipped his notebook open. "I checked the records briefly when I got your call, to see if he was in any of the official files. We have computers nowadays, you know. I can push a button and tell whether or not he'd been recorded in any city or county agency."

She closed the door finally and stood leaning the back of her shoulders against it. "And what

did your computer tell you?"

His sharp eyes flicked between her and the notebook. "He spent two years, our Greg Morrow, in a correctional institution for maladjusted teen-agers. Committed when he was sixteen. Released on his eighteenth birthday, which was eighteen months ago. Prior to the action that put him away, he had a record of classroom disruption, of vandalism in his schools, of shaking down smaller classmates for their pocket money. He was finally put away after he assaulted a school principal."

"The principal should have given him a sound thrashing with a strong hickory switch," Mrs. Cappelli said. "But in that event it would have been the principal who went to jail."

"It's possible," Longstreet agreed. He tucked his notebook in his hip pocket. "We've had complaints about Greg almost from the day he was let out, in various neighborhoods where the Morrows have lived. But other than a suspended sentence for trespassing, after a house was vandalized, nothing has stood against him in court."

Mrs. Cappelli moved slowly to a large chair and sank on its edge, hands clasped on her drawn-together knees. "Mr. Longstreet, Greg Morrow is not merely a mis-

chievous boy. He is the kind of force and fact from which those fantastic and gory newspaper headlines are too often drawn."

"That's very possible."

His tone caused her to glance up, and she caught the bitterness in his eyes. Her sympathy went out to him for the hardness of his job.

"Don't feel badly, Mr. Longstreet. I thank you for coming out and talking to him. Perhaps it will frighten him for a little while and help that much."

"We simply can't lock them up without evidence of the commission of a crime. Sometimes, then, it's too late."

"After the commission of a crime, Mr. Longstreet, it is always too late." She rose to her feet to see him out.

He stood looking down on her, the small sturdiness of her. "I'll have the police cruiser in this area increase its patrols along your street, Mrs. Cappelli. I'll do everything I possibly can."

"I'm sure of that."

"Good day, Mrs. Cappelli."

"Good day, Mr. Longstreet."

She watched him stride down the front walk and get into the unmarked police car parked against the street curbing. He sat there for a brief time after he started the engine, looking at the

Morrow house; then he drove away.

As she turned, Mrs. Cappelli saw Greg. He was standing in the Morrow yard, thumbs hooked in his belt, watching the police car move toward the intersection and turn out of sight.

Mrs. Cappelli started to close the door. Then, with a sudden impulse, she went outside and walked across to the driveway that separated the two properties.

"Greg . . . may I speak to you?"

He moved only his head, turning it to stare at her. "Why should I talk to an old bitch who sics the fuzz on me?"

She whitened, but held back the swift heat of anger. "I thought we might have a civilized talk. After all, Greg, we do have to live as neighbors."

"Who says? Somebody around here could die. Old biddies are always popping off, you know."

She drew a difficult breath. "A bit of reasonableness, Greg. That's all I'm asking. I was happy when you moved into the neighborhood, so young and vigorous. I looked forward to some youthful activity next door."

"Old creep. You called the fuzz."

"You know why, Greg. Somehow I must impress on you that

there are limits. Why can't we discuss them? Observe them? Live and let live?"

He looked at her with studied insolence. "You made a bad mistake calling Longstreet, old lady. I don't like it. I don't like it at all. I won't forget it, either."

Her voice rang with the first hint of anger. "Are you threatening me, Greg?"

"Who says? Can you prove to Longstreet that I am? Just your word against mine. I know how the law works. I know my rights."

"I don't think this is getting us anywhere, Greg. I regret having come out and spoken to you."

He drifted a few steps toward her. The dying sunlight marked his cheekbones sharply. His body was tense, as if coiled inside. "You got a lot more regrets in the future, old lady. You better believe it. Think about it. You won't know when, how, or where. But I don't like people trying to throw me to the fuzz."

"I hope this is just talk, Greg."

He laughed suddenly. "That school principal—the one who got me sent up. Know what happened? About a year after I got out, a hit-and-run driver marked up the punk principal's daughter, that's what. She'll be a short-legged creep the rest of her life. Sure, the fuzz questioned me—but

they couldn't prove a thing."

She could bear it no longer. She turned and started toward her front door with quick steps.

"Don't forget to think about it, old lady," he called after her. "And remember—nobody ever proves a thing on Greg Morrow."

Three passing days brought Mrs. Cappelli the faint hope that Greg had thought twice and again. Perhaps his insults and threat had sufficed his ego. Usually, such fellows were mostly talk. Usually.

The fourth night Mrs. Cappelli stirred in her always-light sleep, dreaming that she smelled smoke. She murmured in her half-conscious state; and then she had the sudden, clear, icy knowledge that she was not asleep.

She flung back the sheet, a small cry in her throat, and stumbled upright, a ghostly pale figure in her ankle-length white nightgown.

"Isadora!" she cried out as she hurried into the hallway. "Isadora; lazy-head, wake up! The house is on fire!"

Isadora's bedroom door flung open and Isadora appeared, gowned like her mistress, her iron gray hair hanging in two limp braids across her shoulders.

"What is it? What's happening?" Isadora chattered, her eyes bulging. She glimpsed the faint

reddish glow in the stairwell and began crossing herself again and again. "Oh, heaven be merciful! Mercy from heaven!"

Together the two women stumbled in haste down the stairway. The fiery reflection was stronger in the dining room.

"Quickly, Isadora! The kitchen!"

They ran across the dining room, wavering to a halt inside the kitchen. Mrs. Cappelli's quick glance divined the situation. The curtains over the glass portion of the outside door had caught fire first. They were now remaining bits of falling ash and embers. The flames had spread easily to the window curtains along the rear of the kitchen, and were now gnawing at the cabinetwork, fouling the air with the stench of burning varnish.

Isadora dashed into the pantry, knocking pots helter-skelter as she grabbed two of the larger ones. Mrs. Cappelli was more direct. She pulled the sink-squirter hose out to its full extension, turned the cold water on hard, and fought the flames back until she had drenched out the last flicker.

With wisps of smoke still seeping from the cabinetwork, Mrs. Cappelli groped for a kitchen chair and sank into it weakly. She matched long breaths with the

gulps Isadora was taking, and strength began to return.

"How horrible it might have been," Isadora said through chattering teeth, "if you hadn't awakened."

"Yes," Mrs. Cappelli said.

Isadora gripped the kitchen table to help herself out of her chair. "We must call the fire department to make sure everything is out."

"Yes."

"And the police."

"No!"

Isadora looked at Mrs. Cappelli, wondering at the sharpness of her tone. "Maria . . . we know who did this. We know he has been planning, waiting, thinking and deciding what to do."

"Yes, and tonight he made his move." Mrs. Cappelli's gaze examined the fire-blackened kitchen door and paused at its base. She got up, crossed to the door, and knelt down. She touched the ashes at the base of the door. "And so simply he did it," she said. "Not all these ashes are from burned fabric. Some of them feel very much like brittle burned paper. So easily, without breaking in or leaving marks on the kitchen door, he simply slid strips of paper underneath the door until he had a sufficient pile inside. Then it remains for him but to light the

tail end of the final strip and watch the tiny flame creep along the paper under the door and ignite the pile inside. Soon the hungry flames reach up to touch the curtains . . .”

The two women were an immobile tableau—Isadora standing beside the table, Mrs. Cappelli kneeling at the door, looking at each other.

“Yes, I see,” Isadora said. “It’s all very clear. It would be clear to the police. But they cannot make the youth confess. They are not permitted. And he will have an alibi, someone to swear that he was far away from this street tonight.”

A small sob caught in Mrs. Cappelli’s throat. “How much can we endure, Isadora? Call the firemen quickly. Then I want the phone. Late as it is, I want to hear the sound of John’s voice.”

At ten o’clock the following evening an airport taxicab deposited John in front of the Cappelli house.

“It’s he!” Isadora said, watching him pay off the taxi and get out his single piece of luggage.

Beside Isadora, the giddy center of a little vortex of excitement, Mrs. Cappelli nudged hard with her elbow. “Quickly, Isadora! The table . . . the dinner candles.”

Isadora darted from the front

door, leaving Mrs. Cappelli there alone to watch the approach of her son.

He wouldn’t have eaten on the plane, she knew. Mama always had one of his favorite meals waiting, whatever his hour of arrival: Tonight Mrs. Cappelli had centered the dinner around *arosto di agnello*, and already she could imagine him filling his mouth with the succulent lamb and blowing her a kiss of approval from his fingertips.

“Ah, John, John!” Her wide-flung arms enfolded his dark, towering, masculine strength and, as always, she wept joyously.

He picked her up, almost as if he would tuck her under his arm, and kissed her on both cheeks.

“What is that I smell? Not roast lamb as only *mia madre* can make?”

“But yes, John! How was the flight? Isadora, wherever are you? Quickly, Isadora! The most handsome boy on earth is famished!”

Arm linked with her son’s, Mrs. Cappelli strolled into the dining room, questions tumbling about her daughter-in-law, her precious grandchildren.

All was well up north, John assured her. All was going beautifully.

He sat down at the head of the old hand-carved walnut table, an

inviting array before him, snowy linens, bone china, crystal and sterling, tall candles in beaten silver holders, fine food in covered dishes.

Isadora and Mrs. Cappelli were content to sit on either side, near the head of the table, watching him eat and anticipating his every wish from the serving dishes.

Then at last he could eat no more, and he rewarded his mother with a loving wink and appreciative little belch.

He laid his napkin on the table, pushed back his chair, and lifted one of the candles to light a thin black cigar.

Mrs. Cappelli was at his side as he walked to the windows in the side of the room and stood there looking at the lights of the Morrow house.

"Now, Mama," he said quietly, "what's this trouble?"

She told him every detail from the moment Greg Morrow had moved next door. She acquainted John with Greg's every habit, the identity of Greg's closest friends, the make, model and license number of the Morrow car. It took

her several minutes; she had accumulated a great deal of information during the time Greg had been a neighbor.

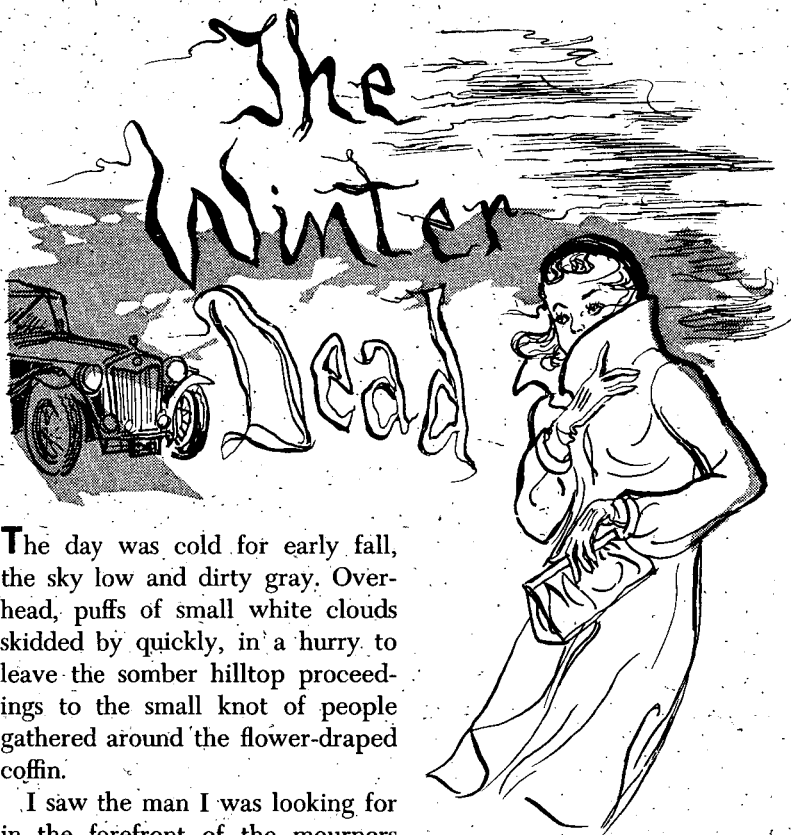
When Mrs. Cappelli finished speaking, John slipped his arm about her shoulders. "Don't worry, Mama," he said quietly. "It will be taken care of. The young animal will stop killing his mother. He will kill and maim no more animals. He will hit-run no more children. He will light no more arsonist fires. It will all be taken care of very soon, when the first proper moment arrives."

Looking up at him, Mrs. Cappelli knew it would be so. In her, regrettably, Greg Morrow had made the biggest mistake of his life.

She thought of John's grandfather and his father and of Cappelli men from Sicily to San Francisco. In all the Mafia—and it had been so for generations—there were no better soldiers than Cappelli men. They enforced Mafioso law without fear or regard—and none was more stalwart than the loving fullness of her heart, her John.



When one is his own judge, his condemnation may be somewhat warped.



The day was cold for early fall, the sky low and dirty gray. Overhead, puffs of small white clouds skidded by quickly, in a hurry to leave the somber hilltop proceedings to the small knot of people gathered around the flower-draped coffin.

I saw the man I was looking for in the forefront of the mourners and moved to intercept him as the little group turned and began to break up.

He was short and slightly built, wearing a dark topcoat, a black

hat and a white silk scarf around his throat. His name was Ryker. He was one of the leading attorneys in town and it had long been said that unless you were on his

client list, you had not yet arrived.

He saw me coming and nodded. "Good to see you, Saxon."

I nodded back. "I am wondering why you wanted me to meet you here. Your office would have been more appropriate."

He sighed. "Unfortunately, my time is not my own. I must make do with a few minutes here and a few minutes there, squeezing in people wherever I can. To find time in my office would have taken another day or two and a phone call would have been discourteous. I require your services before then."

by Stephen
Wasylyk

"All right," I said. "What can I do for you?"

He made a slight motion toward the grave. "Have you ever heard of Sylvan Hook?"

"No," I said.

"Not surprising. He was a recluse, a veritable hermit. He had not left his home for twenty-six years and no one had been allowed in it for that period except myself, and then only in the den."

"Unusual," I said. "Why the withdrawal from the world?"

He made an impatient gesture.

"He accidentally killed his son and went into seclusion afterward. No matter. As executor of his will, I am charged with disposing of his property. I understand there are two cars in the garage at the house. In view of our long association and your standing as one of the most reputable car dealers in the area, I wondered if you might take that little matter off my hands. I am sure you will offer a fair price."

"Cars are my business," I said. "I'll be happy to help. Where will I find them?"

"The address is One Hundred Copley Road in the Whitmarsh section." He pointed toward a black limousine just pulling away. "I should have introduced you to Orval Foster before he left. He was Hook's servant-companion. However, he will be there before you arrive so introduce yourself and tell him I sent you. He will show you the vehicles. You may dispose of them as you see fit. My secretary will have all the necessary documents. The check should be made out to the estate of Sylvan Hook. Any questions?"

I shook my head.

He turned and hurried away with quick short strides that made him appear to be half running.

I smiled, aware that one usually did not laugh at Ryker.

I climbed back into my car and headed toward the address he had given me. The Whitemarsh section was an old suburban development dating back to the early part of the century, when it became fashionable for wealthy people to live outside the city on an estate rather than in town.

One Hundred Copley Road turned out to be a pair of massive stone pillars flanking a gravel driveway. I turned in. At one time, the estate must have been beautiful. Now it was completely overgrown and gone to weed, the bushes on each side of the driveway scraping my car, the trees meeting overhead, the driveway itself eroded and bumpy.

About a quarter mile inside the gates, I came out from under the trees to a broad lawn, now grown knee-high, that fronted the house itself, a big, two-story stone building. Once-white shutters and woodwork were dingy gray and peeling; several shutters hanging askew, the windows blank like sightless eyes.

The total impression was one of monumental neglect, as if the person who had lived there had deliberately set out to ruin the property.

I parked in front of the door, mounted the small flagstone patio and rang the bell. I should have

known it was out of order. I knocked.

The door was opened by a tall thin man with a sharply planed, bony face and white hair. He was wearing a black suit. I didn't know how old Sylvan Hook had been but this man would have had to be his contemporary, made brittle by time and confinement, like a dried leaf in a book. He appeared to be in his late sixties.

"My name is Saxon," I said. "Mr. Ryker sent me to look at the two cars. Are you Foster?"

He nodded. "I will get the keys," he said grudgingly.

He reappeared a moment later in his topcoat and motioned for me to follow. He led me to a huge stone garage that looked as if it had once served as a carriage house, with quarters on the second floor for a chauffeur or other servant.

The lock worked stiffly when he inserted the key. The doors were even worse, screaming protest as I helped swing them open. There were two cars in the garage, both dust-covered, the tires flat. It was obvious that they hadn't been moved in a long time.

I really hadn't given the cars much thought after Ryker had mentioned them, automatically visualizing them to be a few years old. I expected nothing of what I

saw there in that blessed garage.

One was a large black Packard, the other a small two-seater MG sports car, bright red and looking minute alongside the larger car. I wasn't certain of the exact year but they both had to be 1949-1950 vintage.

I whistled softly. "When was the last time they were driven?" I asked.

"When Mr. Hook came home from the hearing, he put the Packard in the garage and it hasn't moved since," he said. "That was in February of 1949. The small car belonged to Mr. Hook's son. It was put in the garage the day of his death, which was in late January of the same year."

I walked around the cars, leaving footprints in the dust. I examined the Packard first. Inside and out, it looked as if it had just come from the showroom, the odometer showing only two thousand miles.

The MG was in even better shape, if possible, having been driven less than five hundred miles.

Cleaned and reconditioned, the cars would be worth more than they had sold for originally, and I knew of at least a half dozen collectors who would be happy to bid on them.

"The son's death must have been a big tragedy," I said.

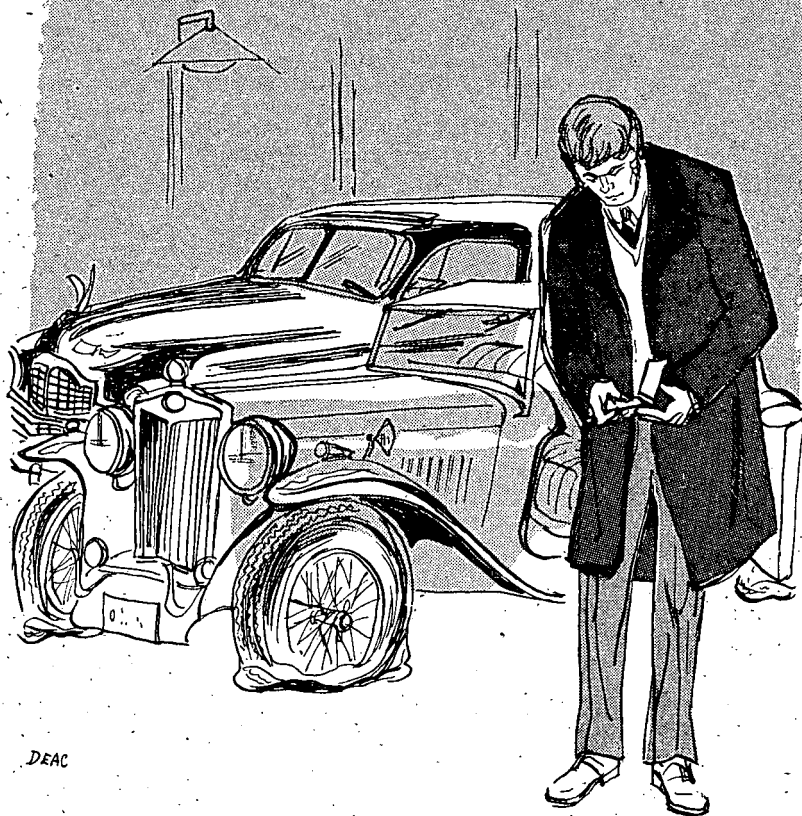
"Mr. Hook never got over it, even though the coroner's report agreed that it was accidental." Foster sounded annoyed at my observation and obviously didn't want to talk. He handed me the keys. "Please close the doors when you leave. You may remove the cars at your convenience. I have nothing to do with it." He turned and left me.

Maybe he had good reason for his rudeness, I mused.

I opened the door of the MG and looked over the interior. The corner of something small and black wedged between the passenger's seat and the floor caught my eye. I worked at it until I pulled it loose. It was a leather wallet.

I turned it over in my hands. The leather was old and dry with a silky feel. It creaked a little as I unfolded it. The money compartment held a five and two ones. The card compartment yielded a yellowed Blue Cross card, a social security card and a couple of faded photos of a middle-aged man and woman. The identity card said the wallet belonged to Rosinda Tang.

I wondered who Rosinda Tang was. One of young Hook's dates? Possibly. Perhaps even the last date he had before he died.



DEAC

I wondered where she was now. Finding things forgotten in cars traded in wasn't too unusual and returning them generally was no problem. I preferred to handle them myself since it was good public relations, and through the years the small expenditure of my time had paid handsome benefits,

both monetarily and personally. The least I could get out of this might be a little free publicity in the local paper. I could see the headline now: *Car Dealer Returns Wallet Lost for 26 Years*. But how did I go about locating someone who had lost something twenty-six years before? I could ask Foster if

he had known her, but with his sour attitude the less I had to do with him the better.

Folding the wallet, I put it into my inside coat pocket. I would do without Foster. There was no reason why I couldn't track the woman down without him. The wallet just might have some special significance for her and even at this late date, she might appreciate it.

I closed and locked the garage doors and drove to my showroom. I collared my service supervisor, explained the situation and told him to send a tow truck and a mechanic to bring the cars in. "Don't damage them," I said.

His eyes gleamed. "Two beauties like that? I'll send the best men we have. I might even be interested in one of them myself."

I left him and went into my office and picked up a phone book. There were no Tangs listed and then I realized that she would have certainly married and it was possible that her parents were dead. There was nothing to do but go to the address on the ID card and see what I could learn.

I flipped through my appointment book. There was nothing there that couldn't be handled by my staff so I stepped into my car and headed toward the address on Rosinda Tang's card. It was on

Winding Way, a tree-lined and curving street that was one of the main routes into the big city park. It was used every day by thousands commuting from the suburbs into the city because the park had no traffic lights to slow them down.

I pulled up before the house and made my way to the front door.

The woman who answered the bell was overweight, but the old saying about fat people being jolly didn't apply to her. She was brusque and to the point. She had lived there for five years and had never heard the name Tang.

I thanked the slammed door and made my way to the house alongside.

The man who answered possessed all of the jollity and friendliness the stout woman had lacked. He was old, retired he said, and glad for someone to talk to. Yes, he remembered the Tangs. He invited me in. His name was Muir and he asked if he could get me a beer. I declined.

"Both of them are dead," he said. "Died years ago."

"I'm only interested in Rosinda," I said. "I would assume she was the daughter."

His eyes lit with excitement. "You mean you don't know?"

"Know what?"

"She's dead, too." His voice dropped to a whisper. "She was murdered."

That was as big a surprise as finding the cars. "When?"

He thought for a moment, pulling at an ear. "Late January of 1949. I could never remember exact dates."

"How did it happen?"

"The police never did find out. She left for work one morning as usual. Used to stand right out there on the sidewalk, waiting for the man who picked her up each day to come by. That morning she wasn't there when he arrived. She wasn't at the office either, but he thought she had taken the day off. That is, until her mother called during the morning and they found out she had left as usual. The parents called the police and reported her missing. Two boys found the body that afternoon in the park not too far from here. The parents made the identification."

Muir was obviously enjoying himself recalling the gravest act of violence that had ever touched his life.

"Did the police ever find out who did it?"

He shook his head. "No. They had no clues, no nothing. They guessed that maybe someone picked her up outside, drove her

into the park and strangled her, but there were no witnesses who ever came forward and no one on the street could help. You can't see the sidewalk from the houses. Too many trees and hedges."

"You would think that another driver would have noticed."

"Maybe not. The cars go by in bunches, you know. He could have come down the street all by himself."

I wondered how that wallet had found its way into young Hook's car. "What kind of a girl was she? Did she have many boyfriends?"

He smiled. "Ah," he said, "she was such a pretty thing she had more boyfriends than you could mention. Her mother told me that she could have had a date every night of the week and that some of her boyfriends were the rich kind. Mrs. Tang always said Rosinda would do well for herself." He shook his head. "Of course, then *that* had to happen. I think her murder had a lot to do with the Tangs' dying. They didn't seem to want to live after it happened."

"Did you ever see any of the boyfriends or the cars they drove?"

He shook his head. "I told you. You can't see the street from the houses. They could have come by horse and buggy for all I knew."

"I guess the police checked them all out, though."

"I guess." He looked at me as if seeing me for the first time. "Listen," he said, "why are you asking all these questions?"

I showed him the wallet. "I found it in an old car and wanted to return it."

"Probably one of her boyfriend's cars," he said. "Funny it could have been there all these years without being noticed."

"Yeah, funny," I said.

I thanked him and walked out. I sat in the car for a few moments, thinking that I should let it end there. There was no one left to receive the wallet. I could give the money to charity, throw the rest into the trash and forget the whole thing.

Something kept me from doing that.

Maybe I was just reluctant to let go of a good story that might get me some free publicity; it was at least a challenge to find the connection between Rosinda Tang and young Hook. From what Muir had said, they had both died just about the same time, which was an odd coincidence—and I was just cynic enough and skeptic enough not to believe in coincidences.

Hell, it was only a few minutes more into town. I thought I just

might be able to settle it right now.

I drove into the city and parked in front of the big municipal library.

The woman at the desk in the periodical section was very helpful and I soon found myself with a couple of rolls of microfilm of the morning newspapers from January and February of 1949. I turned the crank of the enlarger slowly until I came to the story of Rosinda Tang. It had made page one with a big headline. It was a Friday morning paper and the girl had been killed the day before. The story added nothing to what Muir had already told me.

The next day's paper followed it up by saying the police still had no clue and one of the paragraphs was an appeal for anyone who had noticed anything out of the ordinary on Winding Way to come forward. Following the continuation of the story, I went to page six and stopped.

Almost alongside the jump head was another headline: *Prominent Industrialist Shoots Son*.

According to the details, Sylvan Hook had been cleaning a pistol from his collection when his son Gary entered the room. The pistol had accidentally been discharged and the son had been hit, dying instantly. A hearing was to be held as soon as the father, in the

hospital from shock, was well enough to testify. The only witness had been a man named Orval Foster. There was a short biography of Hook and how he had built his business empire.

I went through subsequent issues rapidly until I found the coverage of the hearing.

Testimony was taken from both Hook and Foster. Their stories agreed. It had been an accident, pure and simple, the age-old mistake of removing the clip from an automatic and forgetting the shell in the chamber. The judge saw no reason to doubt either man's story. The verdict was involuntary manslaughter and the sentence probation, the judge stating that Hook had already suffered enough and would undoubtedly continue to suffer.

I turned off the enlarger, rewound the microfilm and sat thinking.

It was strange. Rosinda Tang had died on Thursday and Gary Hook had died on Friday—two young people who, if the evidence of the wallet in the car was to be believed, had known each other in that January of 1949.

Could there possibly be a connection between the deaths? I couldn't see how. Yet something disturbed me.

I pulled the wallet from my

pocket and examined it as if it could give me an answer. While trying to visualize the pretty young girl to whom it had belonged, it suddenly seemed to me that Rosinda Tang represented all the pretty young women of the world who had died alone and violently, their last moments filled with terror, cut off in their freshness and their youth and leaving only headlines in the morning newspaper that lived only for a few days after them.

We all owed these young women something. Certainly I owed Rosinda Tang more than a self-aggrandizing effort to return her wallet.

Orval Foster came to mind. Whether I liked it or not, I had to go back to him. He'd been with the family then. He probably had known Rosinda Tang. He might even have a suggestion as to what to do with the wallet.

I drove to the Whitemarsh section for the second time that day. The sky and the clouds had fulfilled their promise and it had started to rain, softly and gently, more like spring than fall.

From the driveway in front of the house, I could see that my tow truck had already been there; the garage doors were open and the Packard was gone.

I tapped at the door.

Foster pulled it open and stood, his eyes questioning. "Your men have been here and gone," he said. "They said they will be back later for the other car."

I nodded. "That really isn't why I am here." I pulled out the wallet and held it up.

He looked at it and shrugged. "I don't understand."

"I found this in the sports car."

He held out a hand. "It probably belonged to young Mr. Hook."

"No," I said. "It belonged to a young girl named Rosinda Tang. Did young Hook know her?"

It was almost as though I had hit him. His eyes widened and he took a step backward and without thought, as if the word had been torn from him before he had a chance to consider what he was saying, he whispered, "No," and turned away abruptly, shaken still more by the involuntary answer.

I stepped through the door and closed it after me.

The air inside the house was dusty dry and warm, like that of a place that had been closed for a long time. I followed him into what was evidently a den, which had a desk in one corner, several deep leather chairs scattered about, one wall lined with books, and a large gun cabinet centered on another. The rug was worn

threadbare and the drapes and curtains on the windows so grimy and dusty that they sagged despondently.

How in the hell could anyone live like this, I wondered.

"All right," I said, "if he didn't know her, how did the wallet get into the car?"

He stood in front of the gun cabinet, facing me. He shrugged, his face blank.

"If you don't want to talk to me, perhaps you will explain to the police. Even twenty-six years later, they'll be interested in why a murdered girl's wallet was found in the car of a man who didn't know her."

"Don't call the police," he said.

"Did Gary Hook drive the car the day before he was killed?"

"He drove it every day."

"Then he drove it that morning in January," I said. "He picked up the girl, drove her into the park and strangled her. In the struggle, the wallet became jammed under the seat. Is that what happened?"

"No," he said hoarsely. His skin was drawn harsh and pale across the bones of his face, glistening with a slight sheen of perspiration. The pupils of his eyes were roving pinpoints, looking for what I didn't know. Maybe it was because Sylvan Hook had always been there to tell him what to do

and now he was on his own and it was too much for him.

"I don't believe you," I said. "I think the police can make a pretty good case out of that theory, even this late in the game. That much at least I can understand. What I don't understand is how the boy could have been killed the next day. That is a little too much of a coincidence. What really happened that Friday morning? You were there. You testified but I have the feeling you lied. It wasn't an accidental shooting, was it?"

"Let it go," he said. "Let it die. It is all over. It has been over for a long time."

"No," I snapped. "You can't ever let it go. Not until all the pieces fit together. The news was in the paper and on the radio that morning. Somehow Hook connected his son to the killing. What did he do? I can't believe he would execute him rather than turn him in."

"Mr. Hook loved his son," he said angrily. "He could never have done something like that."

I put the wallet back into my pocket. "I don't suppose there's really much use talking about it. I'll turn the wallet over to the police and let them take it from there."

The gun couldn't have been in

the cabinet because he hadn't opened the doors. It was probably lying on the ledge of the cabinet itself and all he had to do was pick it up. Now it was pointed at me, a big, black .45, and Foster held it unsteadily.

"I can't allow you to do that," he said, his voice suddenly high-pitched and frantic. "I can't allow you to drag the Hook name in the mud after all this time. Not after the boy died and Mr. Hook spent all those years here, avoiding everyone because he was afraid it might come out."

"What might come out?"

He didn't answer.

The gun scared me. There would really be no point in killing me because it would be hard to explain. That was the way a reasonable man would look at it—but Foster wasn't a reasonable man. To live like a hermit for twenty-six years, Hook's mind must have been turned and it was likely that some of that unreality had rubbed off on Foster. He had been cut off from the world almost as much as Hook, and he couldn't have come through untouched.

"All right," I said softly, "what really happened? The boy did kill the girl, didn't he?"

"No, damn you, no! It wasn't that way at all. He didn't even know her."



"Then how did the wallet get in the car?"

The words began to tumble out as though an ancient and time-eroded dam had given way. "I'll tell you! I'll tell you so that you can see why I can't let it go any further, why I have to kill you. Gary didn't drive the car that day. Mr. Hook did."

The skin on the back of my neck crawled. "Mr. Hook drove the car? Why?"

"It was Gary's idea. He spoke so highly of the car and what a pleasure it was to drive. He urged Mr. Hook to try it, said that once he did, he would want to get one for himself. Of course it wasn't the kind of car Mr. Hook would

even consider, but he agreed to drive it into town once to indulge Gary."

"It must have made him feel rather sporty," I said dryly. "Enough to pick up a young girl. Was he in the habit of doing that?"

"That wasn't necessary," he said scornfully. "Mr. Hook was a handsome man. After his wife died, there were many women after him."

"Then why did he pick up the girl?"

"Because it was a cold morning and he felt sorry for her. But what happened was her fault. From the way the girl talked, Mr. Hook told me he did not think she would reject any advances he made, but she was just playing a game. She fought, threatening to expose him. He couldn't have that, not a man in his position. He killed her, not really meaning to, and dumped her body in the park."

I doubted that Rosinda Tang had played any sort of game with Hook. There couldn't have been that much time. "And Gary found out," I said.

"He found the girl's purse in the car. We never dreamed a wallet had slipped out. There were some letters in the purse, so he knew who it belonged to. Then

he heard the story on the radio news. He realized his father was involved and came into the den to confront him. I was here. The more his father tried to explain, the angrier Gary became."

He took a deep breath that was more like a shuddering sob. "You have to understand about Gary. It wasn't too long after the war and Gary had been in the thick of it: He never really talked about where he had been or what he had done. All we knew was that he had seen and done more than his share of the killing. He came home hating it. To him there was absolutely no reason for someone to take another person's life, and if they did, no punishment was too severe. Killing was one thing that Gary could never forgive. Then to find out that his own father . . ."

His voice had become a monotone, as if he were reciting something he had memorized a long time ago. "Gary couldn't forgive it, or walk away from it, or forget it. He insisted that his father had no choice but to turn himself in. Mr. Hook tried to reason with him, to explain there was no necessity to do that, that the death of the girl had been unimportant, but no death was unimportant to Gary."

I knew what he meant. The

majority of men who had been to war could come home and forget it after a time but there were others to whom killing would be forever easy afterward, while at the other extreme there were those to whom any sort of killing created a revulsion, a horror to be avoided at all costs. Gary had been one of the latter. The shock of finding his father had killed someone would have been shattering; the fact that his father considered it unimportant was devastating.

"But Mr. Hook was right, not Gary," Foster said. "Compared to Mr. Hook, the girl was a nobody. After a few days, no one would miss her. Gary reached for the phone, saying he would call the police himself. Mr. Hook tried to stop him. He picked up the gun and swung it at Gary's head. Gary ducked. The gun struck the edge of the desk and went off, killing Gary. You can see we couldn't explain to anyone so we made up the story. No one doubted it. No one could believe that Mr. Hook could have killed his son in any way but an accident. It really *was* an accident. He didn't mean to kill him."

"Like he didn't mean to kill the girl," I said.

Foster's eyes had a wild gleam. "Who are you to judge? Mr. Hook paid. He closed himself into this

house as punishment. He sentenced himself to his own prison."

"For killing his son?"

"Of course."

"The girl didn't matter?"

"She deserved what she got, leading Mr. Hook on like that."

A clock ticked softly somewhere. An overgrown branch touched against a windowpane with a subdued thumping.

You can't leave it to a man to be his own judge, I thought. Someone famous had once said that, or words to that effect, but just who or where I couldn't recall.

Then I heard the front door open and Foster's eyes shifted. I leaped for him, my hands finding his old man's wrist and twisting. He let out a yelp of pain and dropped the automatic. I let him go, scooped it up and sighed with relief. Guns and violence were not my style.

Foster staggered back in the heavy, stumbling dance of the old, holding his wrist and whimpering a little, his eyes accusing.

Ryker came into the room. His eyes found the gun in my hand. "I am sure you do not need a weapon to conduct your business," he said softly.

I placed the gun on the desk, handed him the wallet and explained. He stood unmoving, hat

in hand, his eyes fixed on me until I had finished.

"I am sorry," he said then, "I regret you became involved in something like this."

"You are not surprised your client was a murderer?"

He shrugged. "The things my clients are guilty of no longer surprise me."

"Aren't you going to do something about it?"

He inclined his head slightly. "Of course. As an officer of the court, I have an obligation. You may be assured that whatever justice remains to be done, will be done. The police will call on you for a statement when they need you."

I walked out into the cool air and the rain again. The leaves and the grass glistened and somehow the grounds no longer looked so overgrown and unkempt.

My crew passed with the red sports car in tow. They lifted their hands in greeting.

It was over. For whatever it was worth, Rosinda Tang could now rest in peace.

She had done nothing more than climb into a car with a stranger, something parents had been warning daughters against ever since Henry Ford had flooded the country with Model T's.

The penalty had been too severe. Like the winter cold of that January of 1949, death had touched her . . . and Gary Hook . . . and Sylvan Hook and Orval Foster because their lives had ended then, too. Spring had come for none of them.

The winter dead . . .

I shrugged away any sentimentality. I was a hardheaded businessman who had started out to return the wallet as a public relations gesture, not without feeling in the back of my mind that I might profit somehow. Altruism had never been one of my strong points, but along the line something had taken over and I had ended up exposing old crimes and older passions, benefiting no one very much except Rosinda Tang, and she was hardly in a position to thank me.

I slid behind the wheel of my car and headed down the driveway. It was raining more heavily now, slanting down in dancing sheets, the charcoal gray clouds low enough to force me to flick on my headlights. At the end of

Copley Road, I slowed for the intersection.

The trees grew close to the road here and hung low, throwing the unpaved path that served as a sidewalk into deep shadow. Through the rain-distorted windshield I glimpsed a young woman, huddled deep in her coat, the collar pulled up and her head bent, her face half-hidden, waiting beneath the trees. I wondered what she was doing there. No bus ran along this street and the traffic was spasmodic and light.

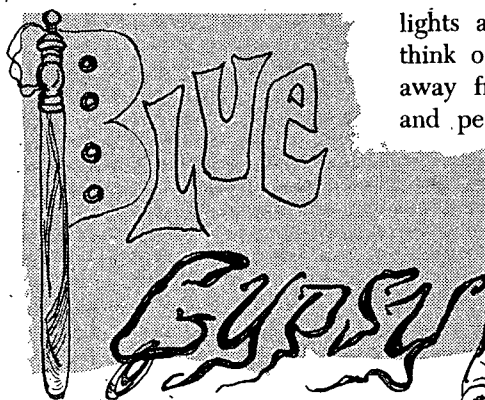
I touched the brake gently, intending to offer her a lift, a refuge from the rain, but when I looked again she was gone, the shadows beneath the trees empty, only the suggestion of a quick lift of the head and a sudden smile remaining.

I put it down to the poor light and my imagination.

Yet the more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me that the style of clothing and the arrangement of her hair had been fashionable a long time ago—like during the winter of 1949.



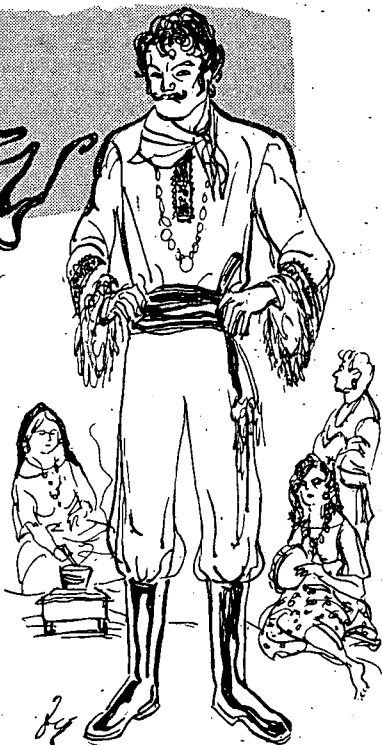
With the essential requirements, one may find himself promoted quite rapidly.



lights and a siren, but he didn't think of that. He turned his face away from the blur of buildings and people along Montana Ave-

John Lang had been old and tired for a long time, but now he was sick as well. Early that morning he'd felt his strength dissolve and he'd crumpled to the walk outside his trailer home just east of El Paso. He hadn't lost consciousness, but he hadn't been able to get up, either. It was as simple as that—if any accident or ailment can be considered simple when a man is in his seventies.

An ambulance had been called to the trailer court, and he had been rushed to the hospital with siren wailing and lights flashing. It had been many years since he had sped anywhere behind flashing



Al Nussbaum

nue and felt slightly ashamed of himself for the spectacle he was causing.

Once inside the hospital, everyone seemed to move with mechanical efficiency. He was given a bed in a large ward, and doctors and nurses examined him and made tests, following some schedule whose pattern and purpose no one bothered to explain. He wasn't in pain, but he felt totally helpless.

It was the same feeling of impotence that had always engulfed him during his dealings with the Gypsies. John Lang hadn't thought about the Gypsies in years—not since he had retired from the police force and moved west almost twenty years before—but he wasn't surprised that he thought of them now. He had plenty of time to think, and a hospital had served as the backdrop the first time they had tricked him.

He had been a probationary patrolman, fresh out of the training academy. He had a young wife and a two-year-old son, and Lang was anxious to make good. It was before two-way radios were installed in squad cars, and all emergency assistance was dispatched from the station houses as the telephoned pleas, or call-box alarms, came in. Patrolman Lang sat on a long wooden bench with

his two-foot nightstick across his knees, waiting beside a dozen other officers.

Lang was a tall, rawboned young man whose pale-blue eyes and open expression evidenced his peasant stock and newness on a job where men grow cynical rapidly. The line of ten brass buttons down the front of his blue uniform tunic gleamed like gold.

A call came in and he and the other waiting policemen leaned expectantly toward the desk sergeant, waiting for him to assign one or two of them to answer it.

"Williams!" the sergeant ordered, addressing one of the older officers. "You and Lang, get over to City Hospital. There's a disturbance."

They leaped to their feet and hurried to the front entrance. They pushed the door open and stepped out between a pair of large, green globes that flanked the doorway and identified the building as a police station.

Several square-bodied sedans were lined up at the curb. Williams was already heading for the passenger side of the first vehicle, so Lang ran around and took the wheel.

When he parked in front of the hospital's main entrance, they found the place virtually under siege by a couple of hundred of

the strangest-looking people he had ever seen. There were men, women and children, dressed in brightly-colored costumes, milling around the entrance and overflowing the walks and lawns. A few had erected heavily patched tents on the expanse of grass in front of the hospital with the obvious intention of staying awhile, and an old woman was actually building a campfire.

Williams had been on the force far longer than Lang. As senior officer, he was technically in charge, but he took one look at the mob scene before them and threw his arms in the air in a gesture of helplessness. Lang stepped in front of him and led the way through the crowd to the entrance.

Half a dozen white-garbed hospital attendants were blocking the doorway. In front of them stood a tall, broad-shouldered man, wearing a flaming red shirt and a black leather vest. His trousers were hitched up by a thick belt that was studded with silver ornaments. A huge handlebar moustache all but hid his upper lip, and a circle of gold with a star in its center hung from his left earlobe. He had the blackest hair and eyes that Lang had ever seen.

"What's going on here?" Lang demanded in the most official tone he could muster.

"These tramps are trying to force their way into the hospital after visiting hours," one of the attendants said.

"We are *not* tramps," the man in the red shirt contradicted. "We are Gypsies, and we have come to visit our king."

"Your king?" Lang said.

"Ramon Darcy is our king," the man said, and several heads nodded in agreement.

Lang looked at the attendants. "Do you have a patient named Ramon Darcy?"

The attendants exchanged glances, then one of them left the doorway. In a few minutes his place was filled by a white-coated doctor with a stethoscope around his neck.

"I'm Doctor Morgan," he told the young policeman. "We do have a patient named Darcy. He's in the charity ward."

"We have come to visit our king," the Gypsy repeated. The others near him took up the chant, "*We have come to visit our king.*" Soon everyone was yelling, "WE HAVE COME TO VISIT OUR KING!"

"Officer, can't you quiet these people?" the doctor demanded. "We have some very sick patients and can't have them disturbed this way."

It took a while, but with Lang

as arbitrator the hospital agreed to move Ramon Darcy to a private room and allow him to have visitors at all hours. For their part, the Gypsies consented to move away from the hospital and visit their king in small groups only. Everyone was satisfied except Patrolman Lang. There was something about the way the Gypsies nudged one another knowingly and smiled that didn't fit.

A few months later the whole thing became clear to him. He picked up a discarded out-of-state newspaper at the train depot and read that someone named Wolins, the "King of the Gypsies," was a patient in a distant hospital, and his subjects were gathering at his bedside from all over the country.

Sure they were, Lang mused with belated skepticism. He was suddenly certain that every sick Gypsy was automatically elevated to royalty for the duration of his or her stay in the hospital. What better way to insure the best possible care and the most possible attention for someone about whom they cared? Lang had to hand it to them, but he hoped he would never run across them again.

As luck would have it, his first beat included the four-block stretch of Union Avenue known as

Fortune-Tellers' Row. Numerous vacant stores had been converted into tearooms and palm-reading studios. There wasn't a day that passed without several people complaining they had been swindled and demanding that Patrolman Lang get their money back. Instead of automatically accepting anyone's word against a Gypsy, Lang tried to be fair. Provided it was a case of outright theft, he forced restitution; or, if the victim was willing to press charges, he arrested the thief. If, however, it was the victim's own dishonesty that made him fall for a Gypsy confidence game, Lang didn't get very excited about it. To his mind there was something inherently just when a man who was trying to buy counterfeit money or stolen goods was cheated, or when a man who had teamed with a Gypsy to cheat a third man discovered later that he had been the victim all along.

Many of the Gypsies remembered Lang from the scene at the hospital. For his part, the many complaints he investigated made him familiar with many Gypsy frauds and most of the Gypsies in the area, too. That's how he happened to notice that Madam Pojas was wearing colored glasses when she never had before.

He entered her shop, more from

curiosity than from a premonition that something was wrong, and he found she had a black eye and was wearing a bandage under her turban. She told him she had fallen down some steps. When he returned again half an hour later, he passed the fat Gypsy whose wife ran the tearoom next door to Madam Pojas' palmistry studio. He, too, looked as though he'd fallen down a dozen flights of steps.

In years to come, Lang would have ample reason to distrust coincidence where Gypsies were concerned, but this time he simply followed a hunch. He was sure there was something going on that the Gypsies couldn't or wouldn't reveal. When his tour of duty was over, he removed his uniform and returned to Fortune-Tellers' Row.

The Gypsies spotted him immediately, of course, but he had expected that they would. He sauntered along that four-block stretch for hours, trying his best to be inconspicuous. His thick wrists stuck out of the too-short sleeves of his bargain-basement suit. He looked more like a farmer in town for the day than a policeman.

At ten-thirty in the evening, five young toughs came swaggering into view. He watched them storm into the first shop on the Row, and followed them inside a

few seconds after they entered.

They hadn't wasted any time. One had the Gypsy woman who ran the place backed against a wall while the others had torn down the cloth hangings that concealed the rear living quarters. They were busy tearing the place apart and demanding money when Lang entered.

Each of the hoodlums was armed with a knife or brass knuckles or both, but all of them together were no match for Lang's long-barreled service revolver. One glance at it and all resistance vanished. They dropped their weapons and meekly filed out of the store and lined up facing a blank wall.

There they stayed for over an hour. No one would call for assistance for him, and Lang didn't dare try to march his prisoners down a street full of late-night strollers to the nearest call box over six blocks away. He knew they would take off in all directions and he would lose them.

Finally, a squad car arrived, the wagon was called, and the deadlock was ended. However, the Gypsy woman refused to press charges, and the weapons the toughs had dropped disappeared while Lang waited outside for help. All charges were dismissed and they were released, but not

before Lang had a private word with each of them. He made it clear that he never wanted to see any of them on the Row again. "If there's a next time," he said, "I won't be this gentle." Then he doubled up one of the men with a solid punch in the midsection.

His fellow officers laughed at him. "What's the matter with you, Lang? You've got it all wrong. You're supposed t'be tryin' t'catch those thievin' Gypsies, not protect 'em."

The desk sergeant chimed in from his high stool. "What we've got here ain't no ordinary cop. No, sir. We've got us a blue Gypsy!"

Everyone within hearing roared with laughter and the name stuck. From then on, only the most official rosters carried the name John Lang. Everywhere else he was the Blue Gypsy.

Lang felt he had been made a fool of by the Gypsies. He had removed the threat to them, and had come away looking stupid for his trouble. What was worse, the Gypsies didn't act a bit ashamed. They waved at him in friendly greeting as he passed their shops, and often invited him inside for coffee or a glass of deep red wine one of them was making in violation of prohibition.

He soon forgot his anger over

their failure to press charges. When he was invited to Madam Pojas' daughter's wedding, he accepted. He brought his wife Sue Ellen and their boy with him, and everyone had a fine time. The only thing that kept it from being a perfect party was that he drank too much red wine and fell asleep. When Sue Ellen woke him up to take her home, he discovered that some practical joker had pierced his left earlobe and attached a tiny gold circle.

He had been able to remove the earring, and wore a tiny piece of adhesive tape on his ear for weeks, but finally he had to remove the tape and his pierced lobe was there for all to see. Until then the taunts of Blue Gypsy had begun to die down around the station house. Now they increased.

He knew he should stay away from the Gypsies, but for some inexplicable reason he liked them. He felt they were no worse than any other group—just different. They were an openly affectionate people who taught him to love good food and violin music. If they didn't plan for the future, he soon learned it was because they didn't fear it. They took each day as it came and made the most of it.

They knew many of life's secrets. They also knew how to

come to terms with death. When Sue Ellen died suddenly, he was a thirty-nine-year-old second-grade detective on the bunco squad. Without being told by him, the Gypsies found out about his loss. Rubin Pojas and Dominic Turan, both old and gray and twenty-five years his senior, came to his house with a gallon of red wine to unlock his tears. Lang learned that lesson well. A few years later, when his only son was killed in the invasion of Italy, he was able to cry without getting drunk first.

When he retired from the police force in 1957, it wasn't because he wanted to. The police surgeon had discovered a spot on his right lung and prescribed a warm, dry climate. Before he left for the Southwest, the Gypsies gave a going-away party and presented him with a pile of presents. The ones that still had price tags on them he returned to the stores from which they'd been taken. He kept the rest, including a flamed shirt and golden earring the ancient Madam Pojas forced upon him.

Lang had always thought the

Gypsies liked him as much as he liked them. Whenever one of his fellow detectives told him he was being used, he'd just shake his head. However, the years since his retirement had proved him wrong and the cynics right. Once he moved away, he never heard from the Gypsies again. None of them had ever paused long enough in his travels to knock on the door of Lang's trailer home. On the day he collapsed, it was a full seventeen years since he had been called the Blue Gypsy.

At ten in the morning, three days after John Lang took the ambulance ride, a broad-shouldered young man in a purple silk shirt arrived at the hospital. He was carrying a scuffed and battered leather suitcase in one hand and an airline ticket folder in the other. He dropped the heavy case to the floor in front of the information desk and ran his fingers through his thick black hair, exposing the gold earring that dangled from his left lobe. "I have come to visit my king!" he announced in a booming voice.

He was the first . . .



Situations do arise, of course, when routine service can be augmented by a little "somethin' extra."



The car had turned off the main highway onto the hard-packed dirt road that led through the desert only fifteen minutes ago, but already the unchanging vistas of hot sand, creosote bushes and bur sage were beginning to get to Bryce. A lizard skittered across in front of them, followed in swift pursuit by a roadrunner. If he was that lizard, Bryce thought, he'd lie down and give up. It was just too hot to run.

Outside the closed windows the alkali dust boiled up about the car, and Bryce pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his steaming face. The air-conditioner sure picked one helluva

time to go on the fritz. He felt like a turkey in the oven, already basted with his own sweat. He reached toward the button on the door to roll down the window.

"Leave it closed, if you please." The words were a request which the gutturally accented voice of the man behind the wheel turned into an order.

Bryce turned to look at him. Augie still looked as if it were a spring day outside instead of the desert's blasting heat. Augie sure was a cool one. He'd set up the whole thing without one hitch, at least none so far. Even while they were in the bank he'd never lost his cool, calmly ordering the pres-

ident and the loan officers to clean out the vault as if he were giving instructions to paid servants. Augie had no nerves at all.

It was Bryce whose finger had jerked convulsively against the trigger of the .45 automatic as they were leaving through the bank's side door, hitting the guard in the shoulder and slamming him to the floor. Even as they screeched off down the road and out of town, Augie had offered only a single comment.

"That was needless, Bryce. If he dies and we're caught, it's murder. But of course we will not be caught."

That was all, yet Bryce knew that Augie was upset. Augie was happy only when his plans went like clockwork.

"Augie, I—I'm sorry," Bryce said in a halting voice.

"Please, Bryce, no more exercises in self-pity. Look, already the road is beginning to rise. Another half hour and we'll be in the midst of those mountains. The police will never find us there."

"If they ever decide we came out this way, they won't have to, Augie. According to this map, the road dead-ends near an abandoned Indian village up there in the mountains. All they'll have to do is set up a blockade and then wait until we either come down or the

sun cooks us dry. We only brought two water bottles with us."

"I didn't plan so perfectly just to fail now," replied Augie, polishing a tooth with the tip of a finger. "Nobody knows we're up here, and escape has been arranged by—" His head suddenly jerked about as if a string had been pulled. "Did you see that? Off on your side."

"How could I? I was talking to you."

Augie slammed the car into reverse and began backing toward the narrow bend they had just passed. Bryce closed his eyes tightly. The road was narrow, with no guardrails; and even here at the edge of the mountains he didn't like the look of the sheer drop-off on the left-hand side.

The car careened back around the bend in the road, and the brakes screeched it to a halt. "Look," Augie said.

An area of perhaps an acre had been rudely scraped out of the hillside with a bulldozer. In its center was a long dilapidated building painted bright pink, in front of which a dented gas pump stood like a drunken sentry. At the rear was a large shed, and next to it, a smaller lean-to.

At the road's edge was a large sign that looked as if it had begun

life as a barn door. It was off-white, with its upper half lettered in blue:

YELLOWBELLY'S PLACE

GAS, EATS AND

Bryce and Augie could only guess as to what other delights the "and" on the sign referred.

"That has no right to be here," Augie said, pointing to the group of buildings. "It was not included in my plans."

"I guess people got the right to set up business wherever they want to. It doesn't seem like they're going to get many customers out here, though. How come you stopped, Augie?"

"Think, Bryce. This road comes to an end up there in the mountains. It will be necessary for us to wait there until approximately ten o'clock tomorrow morning before we are picked up."

"Picked up? What do you mean?"

"That is my business. But this whole plan depends on the police not knowing exactly where we are. However, we're the only travelers on this road. If anyone inside one of those buildings saw us go by, you can imagine the difficulties we'd be in between now and tomorrow, especially if the report of the robbery has been broadcast on the radio."

"Yeah, I gotcha. So what now?"

Without answering, Augie twisted the wheel and put the car in gear. It jounced over to the gas pump. Augie beeped the horn.

The door of the pink building opened. Bryce looked at the man who stepped out into the sunlight, glanced at Augie and then looked again, as if he couldn't believe what he'd seen the first time.

The man was scarcely five feet tall, with a face as seamed as a desert dry wash. A bulbous nose surmounted a fierce, flowing moustache which resembled a steer's horn. On his head was a huge sombrero with chunks torn from the brim. His flannel shirt, partially hidden by a canvas vest, covered a potbelly beneath which the waistband of his jeans sagged alarmingly. On his feet were high-heeled boots of cracked leather.

The strange little man waved an arm at them. "Howdy!" he called in a shrill, squeaky voice. "Welcome to Yellowbelly's Place. That's me, Yellowbelly Dobkins. Been workin' this desert more'n sixty years now. Like to come in and set a spell? I got some chili warmin' on the stove."

"That little wart shouldn't be hard to take," Bryce whispered to Augie out of the corner of his mouth. "I'll just—"

"Do nothing, you fool!" Augie placed a restraining hand on

Bryce's arm. "Look over there."

A second man was coming out-side. He appeared to be in his middle twenties, tall and muscular, with his hair cut short, military fashion. Over his clothing he wore a white apron.

The second man approached. "Name's Muggeridge," he said, without offering to shake hands. "Pete Muggeridge. Me and Yellowbelly run this place. But we ain't exactly open for business yet. Now, want to tell me what you two are doing way back here?"

"We—we are tourists," Augie began.

Bryce hoped he could make the story stick. With that accent, Augie sounded more like a Nazi general in one of the old TV movies.

"We were hoping to see the old Indian village. According to the maps, this section is uninhabited, and we expected to go right on up to it. Of course, if there is a fee . . ."

"No fee," Yellowbelly said. "You can go if you've a mind to. But the drive's about half an hour, and that road's awful narrow, with some mean switchbacks. No guardrail neither. Quite a drop if you was to make a mistake. Besides, it's gettin' on toward evenin'. By the time you got there, you wouldn't be able to see

nothin'. It'd be as black as pitch."

"If you was going to the old village, how come you stopped here?" asked Muggeridge, scowling.

"The air-conditioner in the car has broken down," continued Augie smoothly. "We were hoping you could fix it."

"Uh-huh," grunted Muggeridge skeptically.

"Tell you what," Yellowbelly cackled. "It's too hot out here to be jawin'. You two go inside. It's cooler there. Pete'll give you a bowl of chili. I'll take your car out back and have a look at it. Mebbe I can see what's wrong." He jerked a gnarled thumb in the direction of the smaller building.

"You're the mechanic?" asked Bryce, incredulous.

"Yep. Pete here, he cooks for me and does the heavy work around the place."

"If it's too hot for them, it's too hot for you," Muggeridge said. "Let's all go in and chow down."

"Nah, I don't mind the heat. Been a desert rat all my life. You folks go ahead. Just gimme the car keys."

Bryce looked on admiringly as Augie brought the key case out of his pocket and in the same motion slid the trunk key off it before handing it to Yellowbelly. It wouldn't do for him to get too

close a look at the canvas sacks that were stashed next to the spare tire.

As Yellowbelly started the car with a roar and a haze of exhaust smoke, Bryce and Augie followed Muggeridge inside the diner. The long room was dim, with the only light coming in through the dust-smearred windows. It might have been a little cooler inside, but not much.

As his customers perched on stools, Pete went behind the counter and silently ladled out bowls of chili from the pot on the propane stove.

Bryce took a single spoonful and snatched at the glass of tepid water Muggeridge had put in front of him. The chili was like liquid fire scorching its way down his throat.

Augie ate his slowly and appreciatively, as if he were enjoying the choicest beluga caviar. Muggeridge waited for some reaction from him and was disappointed when there was none.

Wordlessly the two men finished their meal, and then Augie put a five-dollar bill on the counter. Muggeridge shoved it back toward him.

"Not necessary," said the cook. "We ain't open yet. And Yellowbelly's always telling me that in the desert it's best to be hos-

pitable. Next time out, you might be the one in need of help." He turned and switched on the battery radio by the sink.

"... From Yuma, Arizona," came the announcer's bland voice. "And now another all-time great from our collection of dinner music." The ballad was soft and low, heavy on the violins.

"Mr. Muggeridge," Augie said suddenly, "I wish to ask you a question."

"Ask away."

"Have we done something to annoy you?"

"Nope. Why?"

"You've been extraordinarily gruff with us since we arrived. I thought you were angry."

"Not angry."

"Oh? Then what?"

"It don't seem to me that anybody'd come to look at the Indian village dressed in suits the way you two are. Besides, you talk funny. I'm just trying to figure you out."

"I am Austrian, you see."

"Yeah." Muggeridge turned up the volume of the radio.

"Is that necessary?" Augie asked. "It is hard to hold a conversation with that music blaring."

"I like it."

Augie looked at Bryce and patted the jacket pocket where his gun was kept. The radio meant

contact with the outside world, and they didn't like that.

Outside the window, the setting sun splattered reds and yellows across the evening sky. A door banged at the rear of the building, and Yellowbelly entered.

"Found your trouble," he said proudly, holding up something in his hand. "Busted compressor belt. I must have another one in that junk in the shop, but it'll take some lookin'. I'll need light. The lantern ought to be in here somewhere."

He began fumbling beneath the counter. On the radio, a series of staccato beeps announced the beginning of a news show. Augie looked at Bryce with a here-it-comes expression.

"Police here released the following description of the men who held up the Royson Bank, as reported earlier on this station," the newsman began. "The first, who seemed to be the leader, spoke with a pronounced accent which . . ."

The description that followed included everything but the labels on their underwear.

Muggeridge whirled about, and Yellowbelly's head appeared above the counter like a prairie dog coming out of its hole. His eyes crossed as he stared at the muzzle of Augie's gun, only inches

from his face. Bryce covered the big man:

"You're them, huh?" asked Yellowbelly, getting to his feet.

"That is correct, Mr. Dobkins," Augie said. "Now hurry and get that lantern lit. It will be dark in here in a few minutes."

"But why us?" asked the old man, putting a match to the lantern's wick.

"A question in return," said Augie. "Why was it necessary for you to set yourselves up in business way out here in the middle of the desert where there are no cars?"

"'Cuz I got a brain, that's why. Y'see, the old Indian village up there in the mountains has just recently been declared a state landmark. In a couple of months it'll be featured in all the tourist material, and there'll be a blacktop road put in. Cars'll be flockin' here from all over the country. Now, we can't charge admission to get up there, but the people who come by will be wantin' gas and food and such."

"An intelligent decision," said Augie. "I like a man who plans ahead, Mr. Dobkins. But it was in our interest to get to the village unseen. Your being here changes all that."

"Are you—are you gonna . . ."

Augie shook his head. "I see no

need for violence. We will spend the night here pleasantly, and in the morning we'll be gone. That is, unless you or Mr. Muggeridge try something foolish."

"Mister, I learned early there's some things you can't fight. So you live with them. Those who didn't find that out died early. We got no guns here, and I don't plan to go up against the man who's holdin' one."

"A wise decision," crooned Augie.

Muggeridge hurled the spoon he was holding to the floor. "Hell, Yellowbelly, I thought you had sand. You gonna let those two buffalo us? Why, if they didn't have those pistols, I'd—"

Augie leaned across the counter, brought back his hand and then slashed it forward. The barrel of his gun smashed against the side of Muggeridge's head. There was a single loud yell, and the cook collapsed to the floor, writhing in pain. His hand was pressed to his cheek, and blood was seeping from between his fingers.

"Mr. Muggeridge," Augie said calmly, as if he were scolding a small child, "I'd suggest you curb your aggressive tendencies. The next time you become belligerent, I will kill you. I mean that."

Muggeridge stared up at Yellowbelly, his eyes glittering with

pain and anger. "They sure named you right," he groaned. "Yellowbelly."

Yellowbelly looked from Bryce to Augie. "That ain't so," he wheezed. "I ain't no coward. Got that name because I spent so much time crawlin' around the desert, lookin' for gold."

"Tell us about it," Augie said. "It will help to pass the time."

"Mind if I help Pete, too? That's an ugly cut he's got."

Augie shrugged and motioned Bryce to help the cook onto a stool. Yellowbelly scooped water into a pan from a barrel behind the counter and began ripping an old shirt into long strips.

"Started out in oh-nine," the old man said, at the same time daubing at the blood on Muggeridge's face. "Heard they'd made some small strikes in silver and gold around here. Figgered I'd find the mother lode. Never did. Went through many a grubstake with nothin' to show for it but a mighty thirst from the sand in my throat."

"I see." Augie seemed fascinated.

"Learned an awful lot about the desert, though, and about livin'."

"Ah. And what did you learn, Mr. Dobkins?"

"Well, for instance, some thirty years ago me and my partner,

Fred Selkirk, got lost out there on the desert. Our water'd run out, too. Fred, he panicked. Took off right in the middle of the day toward where he thought the main road was. They found his bones three years later, after a windstorm blew them to the surface again.

"Me, on the other hand, I stayed put until it was dark. Only time to travel in the desert—after dark. It's cool then. I managed to squeeze some water out of prickly pears, too. It took me near a week, but I got back safe.

"But y'know, I could of saved ol' Fred. I shouldn't have let him wander away like he done. I felt awful bad about that. So I made it a rule ever since not to run out on a partner, no matter what. That's one thing I learned from the desert."

Yellowbelly slid a stool into the lantern light and sat down on it. "Seems to me, there's things in life you can do somethin' about, and then there's other things that are gonna resist all a man can do to change them. The desert out there's like that. You live with it on its terms; or you don't live at all."

A coyote's lonely howl split the stillness. At the same time something fluttered by the window. Bryce jerked himself about.

"Pay it no mind," said Yellowbelly. "A horned owl, that's all. There's a lot of life out there on the sand—chuckwallas, pack rats, rattlesnakes and such. They learned to stay put when conditions ain't to their likin' a long time before I did."

"I like you, Mr. Dobkins," Augie said, honoring the man with a rare smile. "Your philosophy is much like mine. Change what you can, and try to anticipate the rest. I'm sure that under different circumstances we could be friends, you and I."

"Mebbe." He finished bandaging the cook's face. "You shouldn't have hit Pete like you done."

"He presented a danger to us. I merely calmed him down a bit. Removed a possible threat. I thought you, of all people, would understand."

"I s'ppose." Yellowbelly peered at Augie through squinted eyes. "You know that given the right conditions, I'd kill you for what you done to Pete, don't you?"

"Of course you would. But you're much too intelligent to risk your own life for something as ephemeral as revenge. My finger on this trigger, Mr. Dobkins, is one of those things you spoke about that resists change. Learn to live with it."

"Uh-huh. What time's the heli-

copter gonna come to get you?"

Bryce spun on his stool with a gasp of surprise. "Augie?"

His partner looked at him in disgust. "Mr. Dobkins is no fool, even if you are," he said. "Of course a helicopter is coming. How else would we get out of that Indian village? Would that he had been with me in the bank instead of you. Then perhaps the guard would still be in good health and the police wouldn't be pressing their search so closely."

"Not a bad plan," said Yellowbelly. "You get to the village. Nobody'd think of lookin' for you there. Now, is the whirlybird on a scheduled run, or have you got it painted to look like a police craft?"

Augie's look was akin to awe. "Amazing. The fact is, the helicopter belongs to the police. Its pilot was amenable to bribery. And we expect to be across the border into Mexico before anyone's the wiser. Oh, Mr. Dobkins, we'd have made a great pair, you and I. What a waste of talent."

"You gonna kill us? I mean, I ain't so concerned about me, but Pete's too young to—"

"No. You'll be tied securely, of course. But within a day or so the police will be up here, still searching. You'll experience some discomfort but that's not fatal."

Augie considered the lantern, glowing on the counter. "Speaking of discomfort, there's still the problem of our air-conditioner in the car. It would make things easier for us if it were repaired. Is fixing this belt a complicated thing, Mr. Dobkins?"

Yellowbelly shook his head. "Soon's I locate one out there, I can have it in place in fifteen minutes."

"Is there another lantern?"

"A flashlight. In that cupboard over the stove."

"Then suppose you get it and go finish your repairs."

Bryce stood and looked down at Augie. "You're not sending him out there alone, are you? He might—"

"He might what, Mr. Bryce? We're twenty miles from the highway, to say nothing of a city. Where's he going to go? And if he tries anything, his friend dies. He realizes this, even if you don't."

"I won't do nothin' foolish," Yellowbelly said. He took the flashlight and headed toward the rear of the building. A slamming door marked his exit.

"I think you're crazy, Augie," Bryce said. "These two must have some kind of wheels around here. That old geezer could take off, or louse up our car, or—"

"But he won't. Because that

would endanger Mr. Muggeridge. Be happy we have a hostage though, for otherwise that silly little old man would do his best to kill us. And it's quite possible that he would succeed."

Half an hour later there was the sound of the hood banging shut on the car. Moments after that, Yellowbelly came inside again.

"You see." Augie smiled at Bryce. "I told you he'd be back."

"What now?" Yellowbelly asked.

"I'd suggest you make yourself comfortable. See to your friend. Get something to eat, if you like. You know better than I how long you'll have to remain tied up here, once we're gone."

Slowly the night passed. Bryce slept fitfully, his head in his arms on the counter, but Augie seemed to need no rest. His only act was to pull his jacket more tightly about his shoulders to ward off the chill evening air. The gun which he kept pointed at Yellowbelly and Muggeridge never wavered.

Then the sun rose, and the heat of the day began. Hot and sweaty, Bryce reeled into wakefulness.

"Find some rope," Augie ordered. "We should be ready to leave here shortly after nine. That will bring us to the Indian village

in plenty of time for our ten o'clock appointment with the helicopter."

He turned to Yellowbelly. "Mr. Dobkins, I would like you to go out to the car and drive it around to the front of the building. You still have the keys, I believe?"

"I got 'em." Yellowbelly headed toward the door.

"Mr. Dobkins?"

"Yeah?"

"You won't try anything foolish, will you? Remember, Mr. Muggeridge remains with us."

"Never mind me," Muggeridge said, feeling at a cracked tooth with his tongue. "If you get a chance, go ahead and—"

"Leave him be," Yellowbelly said. "I'll do like you ask."

He left, and a moment later the car engine roared to life. "Smart," said Bryce. "If he'd booby-trapped it last night, he'd have been the one to get caught."

Augie accepted the compliment with a slight bow of his head.

Yellowbelly came in, wiping his face with a bandanna handkerchief. "Lucky I could fix the air-conditioner," he said, tossing the keys to Augie. "Gettin' into that thing's like crawlin' onto a hot stove."

Bryce located a coil of rope in the rear of the building. Muggeridge and Yellowbelly were forced

to sit on the floor at opposite ends of the counter. Then Bryce tied each of them in turn, twining the loose ends of the rope about the bases of two stools.

Augie inspected the knots and pronounced them good. "Don't struggle," he cautioned. "The stools are bolted to the floor, and you won't be able to pull them loose. Just wait calmly until help comes."

He followed Bryce out the door and into the blasting heat of the desert day. The two men got into the car.

"Turn it on, Augie. I'm about to roast."

The engine caught, and immediately cool air began wafting out of louvered openings. Augie put the car in gear and pulled out onto the road again.

"We should make it with just a few minutes to spare," he said. "That means there'll be less time for the police to spot this car. But don't worry if you see a single patrol helicopter overhead. That'll be our man."

The car glided along silently, moving upward on the narrow road. Still weary, Bryce put his head back, enjoying the luxury of being cool again. He turned, and through slitted eyes looked past Augie at the panoramic view, spread out beyond the unpro-

tected border of the steep road.

His brain was still mushy from lack of sleep. He felt something rub softly against his ankle. He shifted his foot, at the same time looking down to see what it was.

With a speed he didn't know he possessed, he yanked his feet up beneath him so that he was sitting cross-legged on the seat. His hands clawed at the roof of the car as he tried to pull himself up farther. He tried to scream, but nothing but a rasping whisper came from his throat.

"Augie, look! Ohmygawd!"

At the same time a new sound reverberated within the car. It was an incredibly loud rustling noise, as if someone were agitating a large glass of chipped ice with a spoon.

"Bryce, do you have to—"

Then Augie saw the thing on the floor of the passenger's side.

Six feet of diamondback rattlesnake, its body as thick as a man's arm, had glided out from beneath the seat and now lay there in lumpy coils. At one end of its body the rattles on its tail trembled faster than the eye could follow. The yellow rhombs along its scaly body seemed to pulsate, and the flat, triangular head was cocked, ready to strike. Its unblinking eyes stared fixedly at Augie's trouser leg, fluttering in

the breeze from the air-conditioner, and Augie—cool, calm Augie—went mad with fright.

“Ayieee!” His cry was one of stark terror. Instinctively he yanked at the steering wheel. At the same time his foot reached toward the brake. The shoe sole caught the corner of the pedal and slipped off, jamming the accelerator to the floor.

Nearly a thousand feet above the desert, the pilot of the helicopter was keeping the car on the narrow road below under close observation; a quick pickup at the Indian village, then a jaunt across the border into Mexico and back again, with nobody the wiser; twenty thousand bucks, just like that.

If anybody asked him why he hadn't reported in on the police frequency, all he had to do was claim malfunction. He didn't have to know anything about why radios went wrong. All he had to do was fly.

The car below wavered a little on the road. *Careful*, thought the pilot. *Just make it around that last switchback, and you're home free.* Then the car began to speed up. As it approached the curve it was doing nearly fifty. It started to turn—in the wrong direction.

The car reached the edge of the road and kept on going. For a

moment it seemed suspended in space—and then it dropped.

Fifty feet below, a rock formation reached up from the desert floor. The car struck it, and almost broke in two. From there it rolled downward, and the pilot could see bits of metal spraying out from it. Then, wedging itself into a crevice, it came to rest.

A small tongue of flame lapped out from the exposed underside of the car. Then came the explosion, with flames and thick, greasy smoke billowing upward. *Nothing could survive that*, thought the pilot, *especially a hundred grand in paper money.*

Twenty big ones for himself, gone. “Aw, hell,” he said.

Then he flipped the switch on the radio. “This is YP-210. You'd better send a couple patrol cars up the road to the Indian village. I think I located that car you've been looking for. Naw, there's no hurry. They ain't going anywhere.”

He switched off the set and cursed his bad luck. Then he figured that with the twenty G's nothing but ashes, he might as well rejoin the good guys.

Sergeant Barney Kowpin of the state highway patrol looked down at the incredible little man crouched in the desert dust at the

edge of the road, with a brush in his hand and a can of blue paint beside him.

"Your buddy'll be all right," Kowpin said. "The doctor just wants to keep him under observation for a day or so. But there's a couple of things I still don't understand about your putting a rattler in that car last night. Weren't you running a risk that when they opened the door it'd be sitting right there on the seat, staring them in the face? Or, worse yet, suppose the thing had struck at you while you were bringing the car around to the front? I tell you, there's nothing that'd make me get into a car if I knew I was sharing it with a rattlesnake."

Yellowbelly shook his head. "I been prowlin' this desert long enough to know a snake ain't very lively when it gets too hot," he said. "When it's much over a hundred degrees, all he wants to do is crawl off under a rock somewhere, and the mornin' sun heated that car up fast. I figgered that thing'd stay down below the seat in the shade."

He pushed back his hat and gave the trooper a toothless grin. "Course when the air-conditioner brought the temperature down to

his likin', first thing old snake wanted to do was come out to see what was goin' on." He looked up toward the mountains, where a thin shaft of smoke was still rising in the still air.

"I reckon he did just that."

"But where did you get the thing?" asked the trooper. "I can't believe you captured it with your bare hands after dark."

"Nope. Had it in a box out in the lean-to. A lot of other things out there, too. At first I was plannin' on usin' a gila monster, but I figgered the rattler'd be better. And it shouldn't be too hard to find me another snake."

"Let me get this straight," said Kowpin. "You had this snake in a box? You mean it was a pet or something?"

"Nope. Only a fool'd keep somethin' like that for a pet. I just wanted somethin' extra to charge the tourists for when they come up this way to see the Indian village."

He nodded toward the sign at the edge of the road. The new lettering sparkled in the bright sun. It now read:

YELLOWBELLY'S PLACE
GAS, EATS AND
DESERT ANIMAL ZOO

There may be more than one way to take care of a reluctant "customer."



Troublemaker



DEAC



by
E. R. Carlson

Frank Dale parked his car in the driveway and walked to the front door of the two-story colonial house. Dale was a man of forty, built like a fireplug and nearly as tough. He had once worked as a law enforcement officer. Now he

was a licensed private investigator and occasional blackmailer. He pressed the buzzer and waited, surveying the quiet, tree-shaded

neighborhood of expensive homes and manicured lawns. Then the door was opened by a small, thin, woman with blonde hair and an unfriendly, neurotic face.

"He's expecting you," she said, and left Dale in the hallway.

Dale knocked on the door to the den, paused a moment, and entered the darkened, wood-paneled room. The room was furnished with a desk and matching chair, a leather couch, a typewriter on a stand, and a table with a tape recorder and a scanner radio. The red eye of the scanner was locked into the local phone company mobile telephone frequency. A man lay fully dressed on the couch, his eyes hidden by dark glasses.

Dale spoke first: "Anything worthwhile since I saw you last?"

"Maybe. One item last night that might be worth something, depending on whether the guy is married or not."

"Good. I've got some time on my hands."

"You want to hear it or you want to read it?"

"You got it transcribed already, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Let's start with the transcript."

"Help yourself. It's on the desk."

Dale moved across the darkened

room, turned on the desk lamp and sat down. Centered on the desk blotter were two neatly typed sheets of paper. Dale focused his powers of attention and began to read the familiar format in which O stood for operator, M for male and F for female:

September 3, 1975—Wednesday—11:45PM—Complete

O: Capital City mobile telephone operator.

M: Operator, this is YK 64-264 Motor City. I'd like to call 630-0153.

O: Thank you.

Ringling (2)

F: Hello.

M: Hello. Is Joey in, please?"

F: This is Joey.

M: Joey, this is Stewart Levine.

F: Ah, do I know you?

M: Yeah. I met you with Bill. I'm a friend of Bill Seely.

F: Oh.

M: I met you one night. I came up and brought a couple of friends along.

F: When was this?

M: Oh, probably . . . it must have been about three weeks, a month ago. Are you busy?

F: No.

M: I've got a friend with me. We'd like to come up and see you.

F: All right. You have the apartment number?

M: Where are you located?

The remainder of the transcript had Joey giving Levine detailed directions on how to get to her apartment. Dale liked the material. It had possibilities. The man in the dark glasses had an uncanny sense for picking the right stuff. Dale knew the material was going to cost him \$200. The charge was \$100 per page which included a tape of the conversation and the name and address of the caller.

Dale cleared his throat and attempted a joke. "What say I take this on a contingency basis? I'll give you half of anything I collect."

The man in the dark glasses laughed softly.

"No, I mean it," Dale said, no longer completely in jest. "If this guy is a bachelor, I'm out \$200."

The man in the dark glasses laughed harshly. "That's your problem. If you want the material, let's transact. I got more important business than penny-ante extortioners."

Dale ignored the slur. He counted out ten \$20 bills from his wallet. Then he headed back to Motor City to see what he could fashion out of the raw material he had purchased.

Dale got up the next morning, brewed a pot of coffee, poured

himself a cup and carried it across his one-room apartment to the table next to his only window. The table faced an air shaft, and it was difficult to tell what the weather was like outside. He hadn't gone to bed the previous night until he had satisfied himself as to Stewart Levine's marital status. The mobile telephone Levine had used to call Joey was registered to Fogle Plumbing and Heating. Dale had called an acquaintance in the plumbing business and got an earful.

Dale drank his coffee as he reviewed his notes. Fogle Plumbing and Heating was one of the city's largest plumbing contractors. Irving Fogle was the founder and controlling stockholder. Stewart Levine was married to Fogle's only daughter. Fogle and Levine lived in adjacent mansions in the city's plushiest suburb. Fogle ran his business with an iron hand. The son-in-law acted as office manager and carried the title of vice-president. A more appropriate title would have been general flunky. However, Fogle did pay his son-in-law a handsome salary so that his daughter would continue to live in a manner to which she was accustomed before her marriage. So far, so good, Dale decided, as he reached for the telephone on the wall behind him.

He dialed a number and settled back in his chair.

"Fogle Plumbing and Heating."

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Levine, please."

"May I tell him who is calling?"

"Mr. Smith."

"Thank you, Mr. Smith. One moment, please."

Dale lit a cigarette while he waited for Levine to come on.

"Stewart Levine speaking."

"Mr. Levine, my name is Smith. I'm with the Metropolitan Fund. Perhaps you've heard of us?"

"No, I don't think so. Who did you say you were with?"

"The Metropolitan Fund."

"You're not selling life insurance are you, Smith? I got plenty of life insurance."

"Oh no, Mr. Levine. The Metropolitan Fund is a local nonprofit charitable organization. We are expanding our board of directors to include more segments of the business community and your name has been suggested to us as a likely candidate. Membership on the board would require no commitment of time on your part other than attendance at the board's annual dinner meeting at the Motor City Athletic Club. And, of course, we would need a signed authorization from you to use your name on the Fund's let-

terhead—a very exclusive roster."

"What's it going to cost me?"

"Nothing, Mr. Levine. Absolutely nothing. Of course, after you have become familiar with our worthy projects, any contribution you might wish to make would certainly be appreciated and is tax deductible."

"What's this about a letterhead?"

"The names of all board members are listed on our letterhead, and I assure you, Mr. Levine, your name will be in good company. Our board members are leaders in the community. Can we count on you?"

"Well, I don't know. I'd like to know a little more about your organization before I commit myself."

"Of course, Mr. Levine. Why don't I drop by this morning. It will only take a few minutes of your time to familiarize you with our membership and our projects and then you can reach a decision."

"Well, I'm a busy man. I got a business to run here. If you can get here before lunch, say around eleven, I'll try to fit you in."

"Thank you, Mr. Levine. I'll see you at eleven. Good-bye."

At ten o'clock Dale picked up his carefully packed briefcase and vacated the apartment. He drove

downtown and parked in a lot across from the Federal Building. Then he caught a taxi and had himself dropped off a couple of blocks short of his destination.

Fogle Plumbing and Heating was housed in a modern cement-block building. Dale walked through the front door promptly at eleven and introduced himself as Mr. Smith to the tired-looking, middle-aged receptionist. She told him he would find Levine down the hallway, second door on the right. Dale proceeded down the hallway as directed. The first door was prominently lettered IRVING FOGLE, PRESIDENT, and Dale could see through the upper half-glass of the door that the office was empty. The second door was lettered simply *Stewart Levine*.

Dale knocked on the door and Levine looked up from his desk and motioned Dale to come in. Dale entered the office and closed the door behind him.

"Good morning, Levine. I'm Smith. I spoke with you earlier today on the telephone."

"Oh yes, Smith. Glad to meet you."

Dale sized up his victim as the two men shook hands across the desk. Levine was a big man in his early thirties, turning to fat. His thick blond hair was carelessly combed and his tie was slightly

askew. His handshake was damp and soft and his face had the unhealthy pallor of a man who spent most of his time indoors.

Levine motioned to a chair in front of his desk. "Have a seat, Smith. After you called I got to wondering, how come you picked me instead of my father-in-law, Mr. Fogle? After all, he's the head of the business."

Dale came straight to the point. "I picked you, Levine, because I don't have any evidence that your father-in-law cheats on his wife."

Levine's mouth dropped open and his eyes looked like he couldn't believe what his ears had heard.

Dale broke the silence. "I'm here to talk about your extra-marital activities last Wednesday night with Joey in Capital City."

Levine recovered his voice. "What the hell are you talking about?" he yelled, jumping to his feet. "Get out of my office or I'll call the police."

Dale stood up quickly and a blackjack appeared in his right hand as if by magic. He slammed it down hard on the desk top, breaking an ash tray, and faced Levine across the desk. "You ever been hit with a blackjack, Levine? Of course you haven't, you rich slob. Let's keep it that way. Sit down in your chair and put your

hands out here on the desk top.”
Levine sat down, visibly shaken by the sight of the blackjack, and placed his hands as directed.

Dale removed a small portable tape recorder from his briefcase. “I want you to listen carefully to this recording, Levine. I don’t want you to open your mouth until it’s finished. If you do, I’ll break your wrist. Are you right-handed or left-handed? I don’t want to mess up your check-writing hand.”

Levine looked up at Dale, afraid to open his mouth.

“Well? Right-handed or left-handed?”

“Left-handed,” said Levine.

Dale pushed the play button on the recorder and the Wednesday night telephone conversation between Levine and Joey came through loud and clear. When it was finished, Dale pushed the stop button and placed the recorder back in his briefcase.

“What do you say to that, Levine? Is that the kind of after-hours hanky-panky you’d like your father-in-law to hear about?”

“No.”

“Good,” said Dale. “I think we can do business.”

“How did you tape that conversation?” Levine asked.

“I didn’t,” Dale said. “I paid plenty for it. And you’re going to

reimburse me for it, with interest.”

“How much?” asked Levine.

“Five thousand.”

Levine sagged in his chair.

“You must be out of your mind. There’s no way in the world I could raise five thousand dollars.”

“There’s always a way, Levine. It’s just a matter of motivation. You’ve got a nice setup here. If this tape gets into Fogle’s hands, you could be out on the street.”

“You don’t have to tell me that,” Levine said. “I know him better than you do. But I just don’t have that kind of money.”

“If you don’t have it personally, take it out of the business.”

“I can’t. Fogle’s signature is required on every check this business writes.”

“How much can you raise?”

“Five hundred, maybe.”

Dale, standing up, said, “That does it. Fogle gets the tape and we both end up losers.”

“Just a minute,” said Levine. “Sit down, please. Give me a chance to think.”

Dale sat down. The two men stared at each other like a couple of poker players going for broke. Levine ended the silence. “I’m going to level with you. I got two thousand stashed away that my wife doesn’t know about. She spends every dollar I bring home. Can we deal for two thousand?”

"A measly two thousand, huh?"
"Two thousand," repeated Levine.

"Where is it?"

"In a savings account at City Bank."

"OK, Levine, let's go get the money."

Just in time for the noonday rush, Levine and Dale entered the lobby of City Bank. Dale seated himself on a bench near the entrance and Levine took a place in line, with instructions to withdraw the two thousand in \$50 bills. Dale rested his briefcase on his knees and kept a watchful eye on Levine. When Levine finally reached a teller's cage, Dale opened his briefcase, removed the tape from the recorder and replaced it with a blank tape from his coat pocket. A few minutes later Levine returned with a handful of money.

"Let's go back to your car," Dale said, getting up from the bench.

"No," said Levine. "We do business right here. You're not

getting me alone again with that blackjack."

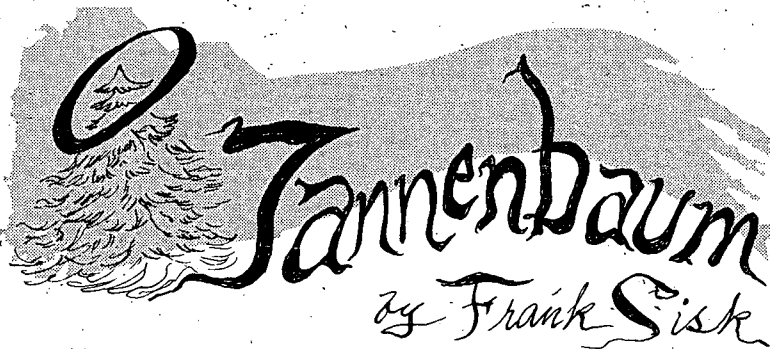
"All right," Dale said, his trained eyes surveying the bank lobby carefully before he reseated himself. Levine remained standing.

Dale opened his briefcase so that the recorder was in view of Levine, and removed the tape. Levine handed him the money and Dale counted it. Dale handed him the tape and Levine took off like a rabbit. Dale allowed himself a smile as he followed Levine out of the bank and watched him drive off.

Dale had one more stop to make before calling it quits with Levine. He crossed over to the Federal Building and used one of the postal scales in the lobby to weigh the tape Levine thought he had purchased. Then he bought a stamped envelope and some additional postage and looked up Irving Fogle's home address in a telephone directory. He dropped the bulky envelope into the mail slot, hoping that he was causing Levine at least three thousand dollars' worth of trouble.



Let those readers who are telekinetically inclined beware lest they become ensnared in certain occult currents.



Tannenbaum

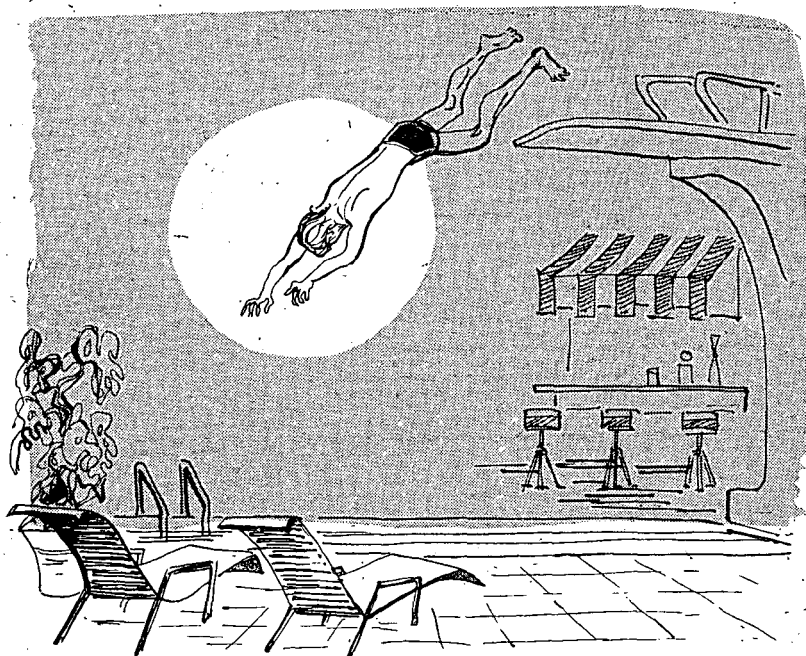
by Frank Sisk

The chairman of the executive committee had delegated, nay drafted, me to take Dr. Hilliard Pfennig, the visiting lecturer, to the Maryland Club for cocktails. As we sat chatting over the first round in the plush leather of the lounge, I offered Pfennig dinner too, but he said he would dine on the airplane. He very much liked to eat aboard planes, he said. There was something about the high altitudes which seemed to stimulate his taste buds.

While I was still pondering this, he ventured into a monologue which soon began to sound like a tortuous footnote to the lecture on telepathic relationships that he'd delivered earlier in the afternoon.

Lila, the shapely cocktail waitress, was meanwhile lurking in a dim corner. The bartender, a graduate student named Winkelmann, was attentively immersed in a buff-covered periodical—either the school quarterly or *The American Scholar*, to judge from its exterior format—and in the dining room the string ensemble was tuning up.

Coming back to Pfennig's voice, deep and didactic, I was clobbered at once by the phrase "telekinetic phenomena" and then, off balance, by "hypothetical prediction" and "topological psychology." Pfennig obviously deserved his reputation as an irrepressible shoptalker.



With a sudden decisive twang of strings the ensemble entered upon its traditional overture, *Maryland, My Maryland*.

Pfennig stopped in midsentence. An expression of almost cherubic rapture suffused his apple-cheeked face. At first I thought the tune was evoking memories of a Confederate skeleton sinistrally hidden in his Teutonic closet, but he quickly disabused me of this idea by removing his bifocals, lowering the lids dreamily over his pale blue eyes and beginning to sing in an off-key *sotto voce*:

“O Tannenbaum, o Tan-

nenbaum/Wei schön sind deine Blätter . . .”

Of course! The Maryland Club's theme song, the air round which the armies of Lee and Jackson erstwhile rallied, had been based by its sentimental composer on the old German Christmas carol and that in turn, if memory for trivia serves, had been cribbed from a twelfth-century drinking song popular with mead at Oxford, *Mihi est Propositum*.

When the ensemble glissaded into the modern era with a rendition of *Moon River*, Pfennig fell silent, opened his eyes and re-

placed his glasses, a reminiscential smile lingering on his lips.

"Bravo!" I said for lack of anything else.

"Unseasonal the song," he said, "but I could not resist the coincidence of it."

"The coincidence?"

"Ja, Professor. The coincidence that I should be discussing telepathy in general terms when all of a sudden up pops Tannenbaum. So we go by the coincidence of music from the general to the particular. For in the case of Tannenbaum we have a classic example of the telepathic personality."

"I'm afraid, Doctor," I said, "that you've left me in the dark, as it were, with an unlighted Christmas tree here in the middle of September."

"Please forgive me. Impetuosity of thought. The fir tree of the carol is of no importance whatever. A trigger only. Tannenbaum was the name of a patient. He consulted me three years ago while I was still in active practice."

"Now I see the light."

"Tannenbaum was not his real name. Nein. I was in the process at that time of coding my files. You will no doubt recall, Professor, that a psychiatrist's files were not inviolate in those days. Vatergate, plumbers and vat-not. Tan-

nenbaum's real name was Furbush. In assigning code names I was favoring always an etymological approach if possible."

"Ingenious," I said, signaling Lila from the shadows. "I think we owe ourselves another drink."

"Why not?" Pfennig said, eyeing his empty glass.

"Do it again, Lila," I said.

"O Tannenbaum," Pfennig said as soon as Lila left on her mission of mercy. "He comes first to my office without an appointment. My name and address he gets from the Yellow Pages."

"A convenient source," I said.

"On that day I have not a tittle of time for him. We chat for two minutes only. I observe him with care. He dresses well. He is thirty-six years of age. His hair is what you call sandy. He wears it longer than yours or mine. From his ears to the underneath part of his chin he cultivates a preposterous fringe of whiskers. We see similar adornments in certain depictions of Tennyson, Thackeray and Thoreau. I might wonder whether the letter *T* they hold in common signifies something—except that my patient's name is not really Tannenbaum."

"Ah," I said.

"Luckily he sports no *schnurrbart*."

"A moustache?"

"Ja, a moustache. I say luckily because he is a chain smoker of cigarettes. A moustache would constitute a fire hazard. He seems a very nervous man and so I arrange for him an appointment a few days later."

"What was his trouble, Doctor?"

"His wife was his trouble, Professor."

Again I said, "Ah."

"During that first session I find out a few basics about the nervous Mr. Tannenbaum. Right away I find out one thing he *doesn't* have to be nervous about is—"

Lila arrived with the new drinks.

Smiling patiently, Pfennig awaited upon her withdrawal before continuing. "About money he does not need to be nervous. He is a man of considerable means. A few years earlier he has inherited simultaneously—you hear me right, Professor—simultaneously he has inherited two tidy fortunes. Vun from his father, another from his mother. These parents have died together in the crash of a private plane and Tannenbaum is the sole offspring of their union.

"Meanwhile he has met and married a very attractive young woman. He displays to me from his vallet a snapshot in color of this wife. Oh, a tasty dish she is, a dainty dumpling. For the office

record I christen her Margarita, but of course—" with an elaborate wink of his right eye, "—that is not her actual name."

"Margarita Furbush," I said, lifting my glass.

"Half right," Pfennig said, his own glass aloft. "I toast Margarita Tannenbaum. I toast her anonymity."

"As you wish, Doctor."

"Prosit, Professor."

With grave courtesy we downed goodish swallows and set the depleted glasses on their respective coasters. Pfennig helped himself to a few assorted nuts from a small bowl.

I said, "This man you call Tannenbaum appears to have enjoyed certain advantages usually regarded as prerequisites to a fairly blissful life: namely, a barrel of money and a beautiful wife. So why was he so jumpy?"

"Tannenbaum's problem was twofold," Pfennig said, munching. "First, the man worshipped the ground this beautiful wife walked on. Second, he harbored a strong fear that she was going to vanish from his life like a—how to put it?—like a, like a *tautropfen* in the desert dawn. Quickly."

Tautropfen? I thought. *Dew-drop?*

"So this fear was gradually grinding the man down," Pfennig

said, going for more nuts. "When he came to see me he was sleeping already like a regular insomniac and eating like a sick *vogelscheuche*. His head was not functioning too well either."

Vogelscheuche? Scarecrow? "Was there another man in the offing?" I asked, garnering a couple of nuts for myself.

"Nein." Pfennig chewed thoughtfully a moment. "Nein," he said again, more emphatically. "There was no other man at this time. I think it is safe to say that."

"Then what in the devil was putting the man off-stride, Doctor? A pathological delusion?"

"Which of us can truly tell where delusion ends and intuition begins? Or vice versa."

"I dare say," I said.

"Suffice it to say, Professor, that Tannenbaum was absolutely convinced that a catastrophe was about to overtake his wife. He told me of storm clouds he could practically see forming above Margaritha's head, like in a cartoon."

"Did the catastrophe have specific shape?"

"Not yet. It is what you might call amorphous when he first consults me. A cloud, a shadowy hint, a faint whisper. Sometimes he wakes in the middle of the night and catches a strange word coming

to him out of the darkness, sort of bouncing softly off the walls."

"Always the same word?"

"Always. *Ödemort*. That is the word he always hears."

"A death ode?"

"Myself I thought of that also. Later I discover another interpretation which I will come to in a moment. Meanwhile, Professor, a question. Are you familiar with the theory of Odylic force?"

"It rings a bell dimly, Doctor."

"That is as it should be. It is at best a dim hypothesis. It was originally propounded in the middle of the last century by a German industrialist, Baron von Reichenbach, who may be remembered by a few chemists today as the inventor of creosote and paraffin. But the baron's own favorite invention, the idea of Odylic force, was given small credence by men of science even a hundred years ago. What it amounted to was the baron's unshakable belief that nature contained a mysterious element theretofore undetected by mankind. This element was a power lying somewhere between the existence of animal magnetism and the energy waves generated by heat, cold and light. The baron claimed that this power, though all-pervasive, was so subtle that the majority of humans were incapable of sensing it. Those gifted

few who do feel the emanations of Odylic force, according to the baron, were often granted a special awareness, an unerring instinct for events impending, much like birds which migrate in advance of polar frigidity or fish which return to the rivers of their birth to spawn and die."

Lila, responding to an emanation of my own, loomed peripherally. By gesture I made known the need for more drinks, more nuts. She nodded silently and floated toward the bar.

Pfennig, undiverted, pursued his divagations.

"... von Reichenbach's absurd theory came to mind when Tannenbaum was describing for me other manifestations of his prescience. For instance, on more than one occasion at breakfast, while Margarita was pouring the coffee, he would feel a cold moist curtain drop between them for a few seconds. On other occasions, as they lay basking beside their swimming pool, he would feel the hot sunlight suddenly leave his body as if an eclipse were in progress, but when he opened his eyes there wouldn't be a single cloud in the sky. Old von Reichenbach would call these phenomena proof of Odylic force."

"What about Margarita? Was she conscious of these cold

flashes that her husband felt?"

"Not at all. She heard no words in the middle of the night. She felt no damp curtains, no eclipsed sun. Until her husband finally confided these things to her, she was blissfully ignorant, maybe even happy."

"Did she entertain the idea that her husband might be off his rocker?"

"Ja, eventually she suspected as much. But not at first. Tannenbaum, understood, had already a case history of supernormal foresight. Past instances of this he imparted to his wife. Initially she listened with a respect that was more or less Höflichkeit, for after all one of these instances concerned herself. It was Tannenbaum's contention, you see, that when he first set eyes on her at a neighborhood cocktail party she was shrouded for a fleeting moment in a prismatic mist, a sort of *regenbogen*, and from this unique enfoldment he somehow deduced (and rightly so) that he was destined to take this woman to be his wife within the fortnight."

"A *regenbogen*?" I said, taking a gulp of the drink that Lila had just set in front of me.

"A *regenbogen*," said Pfennig, likewise drinking.

"Like that which the mythical pot of gold is at the end of?"

"Exactly," Pfennig confirmed.

"What other instances of allegedly provable prevision did this gentleman experience, Doctor?"

Pfennig gazed owlshly for several seconds at the new bowl of nuts and then reached for it with raking fingers. "Your skepticism, Professor, is no greater than was mine in the beginning. It is all there, black and white, in my files. I record my early doubts, my modified opinion, my slow acceptance."

"Do you mean you're now a true believer?"

"Let us say I am an agnostic in accordance with the axiom set forth by Thomas Huxley—that is, in the psychic and spiritual world I see no certitudes but I am always villing to explore."

"Fair enough."

"During our first sessions I regarded Tannenbaum's revelations with mostly a raised eyebrow. He said he began to receive flickers of foresight when he was still a small boy—six or seven. The earliest incident he could recall clearly concerned a soft-boiled egg. He was sitting at the kitchen table as was his morning custom while a woman named Ethel, the family cook, prepared his usual breakfast—a glass of orange juice, two slices of toast and vun three-minute egg. Just a moment before

Ethel started to do vhat she'd done hundreds of times in the past—namely, to lift with a spoon from the pan of boiling vater the soft-boiled egg preparatory to rinsing it under the cold-vater faucet at the sink—just a moment before she started to do this, Tannenbaum's mind saw for a second a sharply delineated image of an egg breaking on the floor, its yolk a splatter of yellow on the red tile. And even as this mental picture vanished it vas succeeded almost at vunce by the actuality. The soft-boiled egg rolled from the spoon in Ethel's hand and shattered Humpty-Dumpty at her feet.

"By itself, this particular event vould have seemed trivial to young Tannenbaum, but in the light of vhat followed in veeks to come he vas forced to face the possibility that he vas gifted with a certain foresight."

"You're sure it wasn't hindsight, Doctor?"

"I stated already my eyebrows vere raised. When he told me about the hailstorm that came a few veeks after the egg, my eyebrows vent higher up."

"What about the hailstorm?"

"He dreamed vun night that stones vere falling from the sky, stones the size of marbles, breaking vindows, ripping through awn-

ings, giving people lumps on the head. When he told his parents about the dream, they scoffed. It vas, understand, the month of July, a bright Connecticut morning. That afternoon the sky all of a sudden grew dark and turbulent and a cold vind svept down and around, followed by a downpour of hailstones that lasted for five minutes. Meteorologists in the area vere dumbfounded. Nothing like it had occurred there in thirty years. After that, Mr. and Mrs. Furbush—or Tannenbaum as I generally think of them now—gave their son's predictions somewhat more serious attention. Not too much so, because he vas still a child and often he vas not absolutely right."

"It seems to me, Doctor, that coincidences like this can be found in hundreds of family histories, thousands."

"And so it seemed to me, Professor, until Tannenbaum brought to me his diaries."

"Diaries can be doctored, Doctor."

"I would profess that idea myself, Professor, except in the case of Tannenbaum's diaries. Let me explain. You vill see for yourself. Tannenbaum began to keep a rudimentary diary at the age of fourteen and he vas still keeping it, with a refinement of detail,

twenty-two years later when he first entered my office. Ve are talking here of several volumes of varying size and content, each showing successively gradual changes of handwriting, vocabulary, style and thought. There is no vay such a record could be tampered vith. Even the most careful emendation or revision vould stand out like a sore thumb, and Tannenbaum vas by temperament and training rather a *dudelsack* in these matters."

"A bagpipe?"

"Ja, an instrument of limited range actuated solely by vagrant vinds."

"That was Tannenbaum?"

"That vas Tannenbaum."

Beginning to feel mildly drunk, I semaphored for another round.

"But in the matter of the diaries," Pfennig said, a replete smile oiling the lower half of his face, "the man vas definitely an instrument attuned on many occasions to the vinds of the future, occult currents. As vitness this:

"Wherever he vould enter in his diary an intimation of some future event vvhich might eventually come to pass, he later underlined in red ink both the prediction and the event as it happened. Throughout the diaries I counted forty-seven items paired like this. Some, being matters of public

record, vere easily verifiable."

"I suppose, like so many other seers, he predicted the assassination of Kennedy," I said.

"Vhich Kennedy have you reference to?"

"I vas—I was thinking of John F."

"Nein. But of Robert F., ja. Tannenbaum saw it clearly in a dream three weeks before it happened, a dream like the hailstorm dream, only more detailed. The diary entry, dated the 14th of May, 1968, describes the scene of the assassination vith uncanny accuracy. A long hallway, dingy valls, dirty floor, a serving counter slippery vith grease, a stack of serving trays, unvashed dishes. Also is mentioned the presence of a huge black man, veeping. Roosevelt Grier, as it soon turned out. But vhat vas missing from the dream vas the location of this fatal hallway. Tannenbaum told himself often after the fact that, if he had known vhere that hallway vas situated he might have averted this tragedy. Who knows?"

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed.

"Vell, perhaps. But vunce a rendezvous is set in—"

"I mean that's a dreadful gift, Tannenbaum's."

"I vouldn't vant it myself. Take the case of his parents. Their fate he also foresaw but could do noth-

ing about it although he tried."

"How vas that?"

"Have I mentioned that they died in the crash of a private plane?"

"You have."

Pfennig shook his head slowly, sadly. "It seems they vere scheduled to take off early vun morning from Bradley Field, outside Hartford. Their destination, as I recall, vas to be Peapack, New Jersey. A horse show there, I think. These Furbushes vere never happier than vhen they vere in a plane or in a saddle. Anyvay, on this same morning Tannenbaum happened to be in a hotel in Boston. He had come to the city the previous day to attend either a hockey game or a soccer game, I forget vhich. He vas hung up, as they say, on all sorts of spectator sports. Around four in the morning he vas avakened in his hotel room by vun of these bodiless voices vhich vere not altogether unfamiliar to him and this voice, speaking in chorus from several corners of the room, vas saying—"

Lila replaced empty glasses vith full ones.

"—this voice vas saying, 'Go to John, go to John.' Over and over again. He described to me the tone of voice as frantic."

"Am I to infer this vas a call of nature?"

Pfennig guffawed. "Nein, nein," he said. "Although now I see it could be taken that way too."

"What other way can it be taken?"

"John was the name of a cousin of his. John was a licensed pilot. John was the *flieger* of the plane which was going to take off from Bradley Field in another hour."

"I see," I said, sipping defensively.

"Tannenbaum bounds out of bed and places a call to this cousin. John lived in a Hartford suburb—Vethersfield. He was a bachelor. Nobody answers the phone there. Ergo, nobody seems to be home. So next Tannenbaum phones Farmington where is situated the family *landgut*. He soon awakens vun of Ethel's successors. She informs him his parents have departed already for Bradley. He scratches himself and tries again. At this hour of the morning the switchboard at Bradley is apparently in the hands of an idiot and she is totally incapable of connecting him with the airport manager or either of his two assistants. Everyvun is out for coffee. He demands, in that case, to be put through without further delay to the flight-control tower, emphasizing the matter as vun of utmost urgency. As a result, he finds himself talking nonsense consecutively

to the baggage-claims room, the information desk, the maintenance closet, a ticket counter, the paging service and the security office.

"When he finally reaches the flight-control tower it is too late. He is told in a crisp vell-modulated voice that his cousin's small plane has just cleared the field and is now out of sight on its way to Peapack, New Jersey. What's to be done? Not much. Nothing. So back to the sack goes Tannenbaum and slides into a deep untroubled sleep. While he composes himself with Morpheus the plane plunges to earth in the Mountain Lakes area of New Jersey, exploding like a bomb on impact. Charred sections of human anatomy veré found half a mile from the buried fuselage."

"How devastating that must have been for Tannenbaum," I said.

"Vell, ja," Pfennig said. "I suppose at first he was somewhat shaken. But pretty soon he begins to see the bright side."

"The bright side? Pray point it out to me, Doctor."

"I will be as candid as I can, as candid as Tannenbaum was with me. He confessed, you see, that he was not in emotional step with his parents. They did their thing and he, within limits, did his. By limits I mean that his parents kept on him a tight financial rein, even

though he was thirty-four already at the time of their death. In short, he played by their rules or he didn't play at all."

"I get it."

"And so, when they went down with the plane, he became heir to a couple of small fortunes which together made a nice large sum."

"I think I see the bright side now."

"On the other hand, the death of his parents convinced Tannenbaum of two things: first, that his second sight was a curse; second, whatever he glimpsed of the future was never alterable. So it was in this spirit of utter despair that he came to me with the problem of his wife, Margarita. The cryptic communications he was receiving—the curtain at breakfast, the cutoff of sunlight at the swimming pool, the senseless word *odemort* coming out of the walls all night—he knew from experience that these were forebodings of a black future that he could do nothing to change.

"He said to me on one occasion, 'Do you think if I killed myself, Doctor, that I would leave a void in the future big enough for Margarita to escape through?' With a straight face he asks me this."

"About that word *odemort*," I said. "You mentioned earlier that

you finally fathomed its meaning."

"And I did so. Or perhaps I should say *we* did so—Tannenbaum's wife and I."

"Oh?"

"Ja. I suggested to Tannenbaum that he send her to see me. I thought she might shed new light on the situation which would help me better to treat his strange neurosis. As soon as I saw her I knew one thing for certain. The Tannenbaums were as dissimilar in temperament and outlook as man and wife could possibly be. Where he was naturally deliberate and sluggish, she was impulsive and mercurial. She set off his introversion with an outgoing personality. He brooded. She sparkled. While he was forever searching his turgid soul, she was ready to dance or drink or sing. Ja, Margarita loved the Luxus and Lust of life. After her second visit, she frankly admitted to me that she had married Tannenbaum because he was incredibly naive and comfortably rich—a combination perfectly tailored to her own sybaritic ambition.

"Now, of course, Tannenbaum was running downhill fast. His pathological worry over what lay in wait for his wife had transformed the man from a well-meaning chump into a morbid jerk, and Margarita thought I ought to do

something about it. 'Give him some pills to make him sleep at night,' she said. 'Give him some other pills to keep him awake in the day,' she said. 'At least give him something so he's not mooning over me twenty-four hours a day like a dispossessed undertaker,' she said. 'All he does lately,' she said, 'is drink orange juice and swim in the pool, drink grape juice and dive into the pool, drink gin and sleep beside the pool.'

"Ah, the pool," I said. 'The pool may be the key to his fixation.' And she said, 'How is that?' And I said, 'It could be directly related to that word he claims to hear at night.' And she said, 'Ode-mort? I don't seem to follow you, Doctor.' And I said, 'What is the pool filled with?' And she said, 'With water, of course.' And I said, 'Say water in French.' And she said—

"Eau de mort," I said.

"Precisely," Pfennig said. "Waters of death."

"Speaking of water," I said, "do we have time for another drink?"

Pfennig glanced at his wristwatch. "I'm afraid not."

The string ensemble was playing Liszt's *Second Hungarian Rhapsody* as we left the club.

Pfennig sat in smiling silence, perhaps relishing the remainder of

the Tannenbaum story, as I drove cautiously through the midtown traffic. He continued to nurture this silence even after we had reached the comparative openness of the interstate highway.

At length I said, "Well?"

He glanced at me glintingly through his bifocals. "I beg your pardon, Professor?"

"I can't stand the suspense, Doctor. How did the Tannenbaum affair finally end?"

"Most calamitously for him."

"Yes?"

"If he had been using the sedatives I prescribed, he might have avoided what happened. But he was dead set against drugs. He said he was hallucinatory enough without them. I suppose that was so. Anyway, he was having a sleepless night and he left the bedroom without disturbing Margarita and then he did what he had often done before. He went to the pool and climbed to the high board and dove in. The gardener found his body there in the morning."

"Drowned?"

"Nein. His skull was fractured and his neck was broken. There was no water in the pool. It had been drained dry the previous afternoon."

"On whose orders?"

"On his own orders. Once he learned the possible significance of

eau de mort he instructed the gardener to empty the pool at his earliest convenience. That was a few days before the accident. When the gardener finally did empty it, he allegedly told Margarita—

“Allegedly?”

“Ja, allegedly. She swore he never told her any such thing.”

“What’s your personal opinion, Doctor?”

“At the time I thought she was telling the truth. Now I think she may have been lying.”

“Why the change of mind?”

“Greater insight, I suppose.”

The enormity of what Pfennig was implying was hard to digest. I was still mulling it over as I brought the car to a stop at the terminal entrance. Preparatory to getting out, Pfennig squinted at his watch.

“Good time,” he said. “I’ve even got time to phone Pearl and have her meet me at Bradley.” Holding his attaché case in his lap, he opened the door.

“Is that your wife’s name?” I asked.

He gave me a peculiar look

over his shoulder, a hooded look, and nodded. “Thanks for the hospitality, Professor,” he said, placing his feet on the pavement. “I hope I can reciprocate in the not too distant future.” Then he slammed the door and hurried toward the entrance, the sleek attaché case under his right arm.

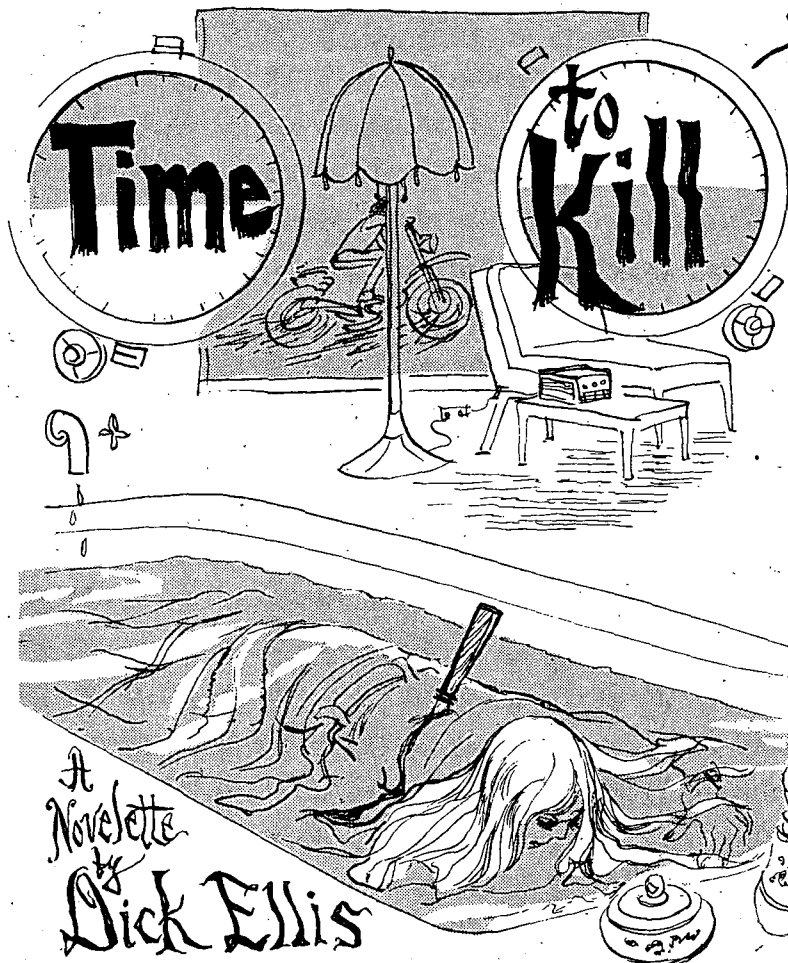
Heading back to the city, I kept telling myself that a pearl in Latin is a margarita.

A few months later I read in the *Times* that Pearl Pfennig, the wife of the well-known psychiatrist, author and lecturer, had died of drowning after falling in her bathtub and apparently rendering herself unconscious. I wouldn’t have been at all surprised to find a follow-up story stating that Dr. Hilliard Pfennig was being closely questioned in connection with his wife’s death, but no such story ever appeared and the glib doctor is still going strong on the lecture circuit.

Of course there is always the possibility that the *eau de mort* reached out at last to verify Tannenbaum’s prediction—or maybe I imagine too much.



Again one perceives the verity of Aesop's advice: Never soar aloft on an enemy's pinions.



The crack of dawn was still echoing across the slate-gray waters of Schooler Lake when someone began pounding on our cabin's

front door. I got out of bed and yawned my way to the door and opened it.

The kid standing there glared

wildly at me and yelled, "She's dead, Mr. Gates! She's layin' up there dead—"

"Who's dead?" I asked.

"That Blair woman, from Monroe. I just found her!"

"Where?"

The kid, an oversized teen-ager named Tommy McKay, who worked at the general store a couple of miles down the lake, pointed shakily toward the wooded ridge behind my cabin.

"Up yonder at the Osterman place," he said. "She—she's got a knife in her back. I figured you'd know what to do, you bein' the county attorney and all."

"Just a minute," I said, and went back to the bedroom to put on some clothes.

My wife was awake now, propped up on her elbows on the bed. She asked, "What's going on?"

I relayed what McKay had told me. Martha threw her legs over the edge of the bed and sat up, looking startled.

"Helen Blair—dead?" she said incredulously. "Why, I saw her yesterday afternoon; she and Zelda Ross drove by. You were still out on the lake, fishing."

"Yeah. Where're my shoes?"

"In the front room, I think. But what *happened* to Helen? They told me that Zelda wasn't going

to stay. She just drove Helen out from town, then was going right back. Was Helen alone up there?"

"Honey, I don't know," I told her.

As I turned to the bedroom door, more or less dressed in jeans and a shirt, I found the McKay kid standing there, gawking past me at my wife's bare legs.

I gave him an ungente shove and said, "Let's go."

Minutes later, panting from the hurried climb up the ridge, I followed McKay into the Osterman cabin—three rooms and bath—and on through to the bathroom.

Helen Blair was dead, all right.

She was floating facedown in the half-filled bathtub, her long blonde hair fanned out over the surface of the water. She wore only a sodden terry-cloth robe. From between her shoulder blades protruded the hilt of a hunting knife.

I bent over and touched the back of her neck; the skin was cool, as was the water in the tub. I lifted her floating left hand and felt for a pulse that was long since gone. I noticed she was wearing a watch; the crystal was smashed, the hands stopped at 11:37.

Behind me, McKay said, "Just like I told you, Mr. Gates. Like to scared me to death when I seen her in there."

"How did you happen to find her?"

"She—Miss Blair—called the store last night. Told the boss she was up here for the weekend, and didn't have no food for breakfast. Asked him to have me deliver a load of stuff first thing this mornin'. So—so I did. When I got here, nobody answered my knock, but the door was open. I came on in and—there she was."

"What did you do then?" I asked.

"Dropped the sack of groceries here in the hall, and run like hell down the hill to your place. I knew you and Mrs. Gates was out here at the lake."

I glanced around the bathroom. On a chair near the tub was a frilly nightgown and a neatly folded towel. Lined up on the counter of the built-in lavatory were an unopened box of dusting powder, a spray-bottle of cologne, and other jars and bottles.

Evidently Helen Blair had been preparing for a leisurely bath late last night, when whatever happened—happened.

I found a phone in the cabin's front room and called the sheriff's office in Monroe. The sheriff himself answered the phone.

"Nice of you to think of us workin' people, while you're loungin' around out there with

your fishin' pole," he said in jest.

Then I told him the reason for my call and he cut the comedy. I hung up and turned to take a good look at Tommy McKay. He'd seemed nervous and frightened enough before; now his square-jawed, freckled face was so pale I thought he was going to faint.

"Take it easy," I said. "You've done fine so far."

"I—I got to get out of here, get some air," he croaked, and stumbled out the front door into the early sunshine. He hunkered down on the front steps, cradling his head on his arms.

Sheriff Ed Carson covered the ten miles of highway and backwoods roads between Monroe and Schooler Lake in not much more than ten minutes. His two deputies and the county coroner, Dr. Pearce, weren't far behind.

It was still several minutes short of eight o'clock that mid-September Saturday morning when Dr. Pearce finished his examination of the body and came out of the bathroom.

Sheriff Carson and I were talking in the hallway.

A fast once-over of the small cabin had turned up nothing in the way of clues. It appeared that Helen Blair had spent a quiet evening reading in the bedroom. The

bed was rumpled, a table beside it held an ash tray crowded with cigarette butts, an empty glass and a twisted candy wrapper; also a book titled *Black Midnight*. Very appropriate.

The livingroom, furnished with several comfortable easy chairs, a floor lamp or two, and a huge radio-stereo set, didn't show any signs of having been occupied. In the kitchen, where we had taken the groceries that McKay had dropped in the hall, we had found nothing beyond a half-full bottle of good Scotch and a six-pack of canned soft drinks in the refrigerator.

The cabin's back door was bolted on the inside. All the windows were down and locked. The wooden front door and the screen door were both intact, with no trace of their having been jimmied open. Yet McKay had found them unlocked.

Now Carson said, "What've you got, Doc?"

The coroner frowned. In his usual querulous voice, he snapped, "What do you want from me? The woman's dead, and that's all there is to it. Stabbed once with that hunting knife—six-inch blade. Penetrated the heart."

"When did she die?" I asked.

The doctor, a small, pigeon-breasted man with a halo of red-

dish hair around a bald, egg-shaped head, looked at me without favor. "You saw that watch on her arm," he said. "It was busted when she fell into the tub, I reckon. Stopped at eleven-thirty-something."

"Uh-huh, but what do you think?" the sheriff put in.

"Well, when was she last seen alive?"

"We don't know," I said.

"Then I don't know when she died," the doctor countered. "No, now—you fellers don't need to give me those go-to-hell looks! Her being in that tub full of water bollixed up things. I'd guess she died somewhere within an hour or two of midnight, either way. So maybe the watch—"

"Never mind the watch," I said. "We'd rather have medical evidence."

"Well, you're not going to get it, keeping me standing here," Dr. Pearce growled. "Let me get her into town to the morgue for autopsy, and maybe I can tell you more."

The sheriff asked, "Was there any sign she'd been in a fight?"

"Nope. Way I see it, she was standing in there by the tub, probably just about to take off her robe and hop in, when the killer come up behind her and let her have it," Pearce said.

"Looks that way," Carson agreed, but with some hesitation.

"She fell into the tub, and that was that," Pearce went on. "Thing is, a body in water don't cool off at the same rate as a body lying on the ground somewhere. Fact, if it's floating in water hotter than normal body temperature, it don't cool off a'tall . . . and in ice water, of course, it cools a lot faster."

"Well—"

"Sheriff?" boomed a heavy voice from the front of the hall; Deputy Buck Mullins lumbered toward us, his shoulders almost scraping the walls on either side. "Listen, Dr. Osterman and some woman showed up. They're out here raisin' hell 'cause I won't let 'em come into the cabin."

Sheriff Ed Carson let out a sigh that ruffled the shaggy lower fringe of his pepper-and-salt moustache. "All right, I'll talk to them," he said. Then, to the corner: "You can take her on into town when you're ready."

Carson and Deputy Mullins headed for the doorway that connected with the livingroom. As I started to follow, Dr. Pearce grasped my sleeve.

"What's 'Osterman got to do with this?" he asked.

"This is his cabin, for one thing," I said. "He and Helen

Blair were supposed to get married in a few weeks."

"Good match," Pearce growled. "From what I've heard, they deserved each other."

With a vigorous nod and a snort, the doctor bustled toward the front door. I followed more slowly, reflecting on what I knew of Helen Blair.

She and my wife had been friends since their school days, but I knew Helen only casually.

She was an extremely well-built, good-looking blonde, somewhere in her thirties, with a husky voice and a rather dramatic manner that didn't especially grab me, though a lot of men didn't share my view.

She had returned to Monroe a couple of years before, after several years in New York, where she had run through a couple of husbands and come away with their scalps and respectable chunks of their bank accounts. She had opened a more or less exclusive ladies' dress shop in Monroe's tiny business district, and reportedly had done very well.

Also, by report, she had spent her spare time playing around with the town's eligible males—and a few not so eligible.

Then she'd hooked up with Dr. Paul Osterman. He is a surgeon, two or three years younger than

Helen, with something of a reputation of his own for after-hours fun and games.

Before long the *Monroe Gazette* was announcing their engagement, and plans for a mid-October wedding.

As I entered the livingroom I heard voices coming from the tree-shaded yard beyond the open front door. A baritone I recognized as that of Dr. Paul Osterman said, "I've always thought this area should be patrolled regularly, Sheriff. Now see—"

"We do the best we can," the sheriff said.

Then suddenly a woman's voice cried, "I should have stayed with her—I should have stayed!"

Reaching the front door and pushing open the screen, I saw that the last speaker was a chubby woman crammed into a white uniform. A nurse's cap was set askew atop her lank brown hair. I knew her slightly: Zelda Ross, a nurse at County Memorial, where Dr. Osterman was a resident surgeon. Now she spotted me and her slightly bloodshot blue eyes took on a blaze of anger.

"And you, Mr. County Attorney, where were you last night while some—some maniac was cutting Helen to pieces?"

I said, "I'm sorry, Miss Ross, but I don't—"

"She's not herself, Gates," broke in Osterman, giving me a bleak smile. "Such an incredible thing to happen—to Helen, of all people."

Dr. Pearce was returning, shepherding along two ambulance attendants carrying a wicker stretcher between them.

Osterman went on: "May I see Helen, Sheriff?"

The sheriff nodded. "Mebbe you'd look around the cabin, too, while you're in there. Check to see if anything is missin'."

Osterman nodded and followed the other men inside.

That left Zelda Ross, Carson and myself. Carson said, "Miss Ross was about to tell me how she drove Miss Blair out here yesterday afternoon."

"I was?" Zelda said, and rubbed the back of a shaky hand across her forehead. If she had weighed twenty pounds less, and had taken a little more care with her appearance, she would've been an attractive woman. Now she blinked once or twice, and said, "I haven't had any sleep—Paul called me just as I was going to bed half an hour ago, and said he'd heard—I'd just barely got home from the hospital—"

"Yes. But about yesterday," I said.

"We—we left town somewhere



after five. Paul planned to drive Helen out here but he got tied up at the hospital and asked me to bring her. Helen didn't drive."

"Go on, Miss Ross," Carson said, as she hesitated.

"Oh. We got here shortly be-

fore six. We saw your wife, Mr. Gates, and stopped to talk to her for a minute. Then came on up here. I—I only stayed long enough to get Helen settled in. I had the night duty at the hospital so I had to be back by seven."

"What time did you start back?"

"I don't know exactly—six-fifteen, something like that." Zelda's plump face twisted. "She asked me to stay the night with her . . . I could easily have got someone to take my shift at the hospital, but—but I didn't."

"Yes. Did Miss Blair seem at all upset or worried about anything?" I asked.

Zelda was shaking her head. "Not at all. She was looking forward to some peace and quiet out here. Of course, Paul was to come out Sunday—tomorrow—and spend the day, then they'd drive back to town tomorrow night."

Zelda paused, then burst out, "If only I had stayed! Helen would be alive this morning—"

"Or you might be dead, along with her," I broke in.

She gawked at me; evidently that idea had not occurred to her. Then she breathed, "Oh, that's—"

There was a stir at the cabin door. The ambulance attendants appeared, carrying the now-laden stretcher. Pearce was right behind them as they crossed the yard to the waiting ambulance. The doctor called, "I'll be in touch!"

A moment later, Osterman came out, his lean, handsome face set in a scowl. He said, "Nothing is missing that I can see. That

knife—the knife used on Helen—it was mine. I kept it in a drawer in the kitchen. Whoever did this used *my knife*—" He broke off with an angry shrug.

"When did you last see Miss Blair alive?" Carson asked.

"What? Oh. Yesterday afternoon. She was bubbling over with high spirits. Didn't even mind when I had to stay in town, and Zelda here drove her to the lake. She was a good sport."

I happened to be looking at the nurse as Osterman spoke. I noticed her eyes narrow and her full lips compress at the tone of Osterman's voice as he carelessly said the last.

Dr. Osterman had a slightly patronizing way about him that was enough to grate on anyone's nerves, but he was supposed to be an excellent doctor and I knew, from having served on two or three civic-improvement committees with him, he didn't mind hard work.

Now he was saying, thoughtfully, "I have to go along with Pearce. It's going to be hard to get a time of death by the body-temperature route. If we can find out when Helen ate last, we can get some idea from the state of digestion in her stomach and small intestine—"

"For heaven's sake, Paul,"

Zelda Ross said. She suddenly looked ill and turned away, saying over her shoulder, "I'll wait for you in the car."

Osterman looked after her with a puzzled expression. Then he shrugged well-tailored shoulders and said, "Women."

Carson said, "Uh-huh. As far as you know, Miss Blair wasn't upset about anything? Worried?"

"Far from it." Osterman stared speculatively into space, while the tip of his tongue moved back and forth along the narrow, bristly moustache that decorated his upper lip. Then he nodded and said, "I'd better tell you something. Helen and I were married last week over in Jacksonville. No one knew about it but the two of us, and the justice of the peace who performed the ceremony."

I said, "But I thought—"

"The big church wedding next month? We were still going to have that, but—well, the truth is, Helen was not at all what you might think, from the idle gossip around town. She wanted that marriage certificate in her hot little hand, so . . ."

"But why keep the wedding a secret?"

"Her idea," Osterman said, with a wry smile. "I think she figured the shindig next month would make a bigger social splash if it

weren't known we'd already tied the knot beforehand. Anyway, that's how it was."

The sheriff nodded slowly. "You know of any relatives she had anywhere? Someone we should notify of her death?"

"There aren't any. She was all alone, as far as blood kin goes," Osterman said. Now his hazel eyes narrowed as he looked past me at someone approaching along the ridge. "Isn't that Frank Ivy coming? That damn busybody!"

Turning, I saw a skinny middle-aged man hurrying toward us, an outsize bathrobe flapping about the legs of the striped pajamas he wore. A large, motherly-looking woman was some distance behind him.

"What the hell is all this?" the skinny man bawled.

His name was Ivy; he ran a department store in Monroe. The woman following him was his wife, Sarah.

"What the hell's it to you?" Osterman retorted.

Ivy ignored the young doctor. To Carson he said, "By damn, I *knew* something was going on over here last night!"

"Your deputy, Mr. Avery, was by our place a few minutes ago," Mrs. Ivy said, joining us. "He told us what happened—"

"Lights blazing, radio blaring fit

to wake the dead," Ivy broke in. "I'm not surprised that Blair woman's ways finally caught up with her!"

Dr. Osterman scowled at the older man, and said quietly,—"I told you last week, Ivy, what I'd do if I heard any more of your talk about Helen." As he spoke, the doctor took a step forward, his hands doubling into fists.

Ivy retreated, putting his wife's comfortable bulk between himself and Osterman. "Ha," he snorted then, "I'm not scared of you."

The sheriff said mildly, "Calm down, Doctor. Mr. Ivy, just what did you see last night?"

"Why, they had a big party going over here."

"Now, Frank," his wife said. Then, to Carson: "Actually, we just noticed that the lights were on in the front room during the evening. And once the radio did come on loud, but only for a few minutes. Then they turned it down. That's all."

"What about the motorcycle?" Ivy cried. "Roaring up and down, stopping and starting right over here. Went on for half the night!"

"Now, Frank," sighed Mrs. Ivy. "We heard the motorcycle after we'd gone to bed, sometime past eleven. It did go back and forth along the lane a few times, but then it went away. Frank got up

and looked out the window, and—"

"I'd have come over here and raised hell about all the racket, but Sarah wouldn't let me," Ivy inserted.

His wife gave him an indulgent smile.

Dr. Osterman was looking thoughtful. "You know, there is a bunch of kids from town who come out here on their motorbikes. Hasn't been so bad since school started, but during the summer they caused a lot of trouble." He glanced at the sheriff and added, "Of course, you didn't do anything about it."

"Now, come on," I put in. "Sheriff Carson has himself and two full-time deputies to cover a territory as big as the state of Rhode Island—"

"Okay, okay." Osterman shrugged. "What I was thinking, if a couple of those punks were out here last night, they might have discovered that Helen was here alone."

"Alone? Her?" snapped Ivy. "Had half the men in the county after her. Alone—ha!"

Again I thought the doctor was going to take a swing at Ivy but the sheriff served as peacemaker. He said, "Doctor, there's nothin' you can do out here. I'm sure you got business in town."

Dr. Osterman hesitated, then gave a curt nod. "You know where to find me. Either at the hospital or at my place. There is one last thing, Sheriff. You should take a very large grain of salt with anything this—this man might tell you. The fact is, Helen's shop had taken away a lot of his store's business. That's the reason for his—"

"That's a lie," Ivy cried. "Hell, I've never said a thing about the woman that wasn't common knowledge!"

Osterman turned on his heel and walked to the big black car in which Zelda Ross was sitting. He got into it and drove away along the sandy lane that ran the length of the ridge before dipping down to join the road that led out to the highway:

Sarah Ivy folded her arms across her ample middle, and said, "Frank and the doctor don't get along too well."

"I kind of got that idea," Carson said solemnly. "About what time did you notice the lights on over here, and the radio playin'?"

"The lights were on all evening—"

"They went off sometime between eleven-thirty and midnight," Ivy put in. "They was on when that racket with the motorcycle started. And I noticed the

cabin here was dark when I glanced this way right at midnight, just before I went back to bed."

"And the radio?"

"That was earlier—around nine-thirty, maybe."

"Did you actually see anyone?" I asked.

Mrs. Ivy shook her head; after a moment Ivy reluctantly did the same. Then he burst out, "One thing; at least—that woman got what she deserved!"

"Frank," said his wife, this time sharply, "we'd better get back. Breakfast is on the stove."

A moment later the pair retraced their steps along the ridge, moving through the dappling of sun and shade caused by the pines, toward their cabin, about fifty yards distant and half-concealed by intervening trees.

Now we spotted Carson's second deputy, Jack Avery, toiling up the ridge. He had been checking the other cabins in the area of the Osterman place. There were about half a dozen of these spaced irregularly along the top of the ridge—the Ivy cabin being the nearest—and on the slope facing the lake. More cabins, including mine, were along the shore some distance below.

Avery reached us, shaking his head mournfully. He was even

taller and thinner than the sheriff, with a narrow face and heavy-lidded eyes that made him look as if he might topple over asleep any moment.

He said, "That was a dry haul. Ain't but a few people out here this weekend. And none of them seen anything last night, except an old couple named Ivy."

"They was just over here," Carson said. He turned to stare thoughtfully at the weather-beaten front wall of the cabin a few feet away. "What really happened in there?"

I didn't have an answer. Neither did Avery, nor did Buck Mullins, when he turned up a few minutes later. Carson had sent him down to the general store to ask the owner about the call from Helen Blair last night.

"Just like that McKay kid told you all," Mullins said. "She phoned around eight-thirty, nine o'clock, wantin' some eats delivered first thing this mornin'."

"How was Tommy doing?" I asked the big deputy. "He looked like he was ready for the hospital when he left here a while ago."

Mullins shrugged massive shoulders. "He must've perked up some. The old feller who runs the store said Tommy came in and told him what had happened, then asked for the day off. Then he

changed his clothes and headed for town. He lives with his married sister in Monroe, when he ain't stayin' at a room he's got fixed up over the store out here."

Soon after that Carson and Avery left for town. For the time being Deputy Mullins was to stay at the lake, giving the Osterman cabin another going over and generally keeping an eye on things. I plodded down the steep ridge and along the shore to my cabin.

I found that my wife had already packed the car with the meager gear we had brought out yesterday afternoon.

"Another weekend shot to hell," I said glumly, as Martha and I drove along the shore road to the general store, then turned onto the graveled road that led to the highway.

Martha gave me an irritable glance and said, "I doubt if Helen got herself murdered just to keep you from enjoying your fishing."

I grunted. "How did Helen seem when you saw her?"

"You mean yesterday? I told you, she and Zelda Ross just stopped for a minute. Helen seemed to be in a good mood. Said she was going to spend the evening reading and relaxing, and get to bed early."

"Yeah. You didn't get the notion she might've been expecting

to receive any visitors?" I asked.

"No. In fact, she made it clear she'd be alone—and wanted it that way. She did say she'd come down this morning to keep me company while you were out on the lake."

We rode in silence for a while. The woods that flanked the road were just beginning to put on their autumn colors. We reached the blacktop highway and turned north.

I said, "It's all so damn neat—up to a point."

I didn't realize I'd spoken aloud until Martha said, "What's so damn neat?"

"Just about everything we saw and heard this morning makes it look like Helen really did what she told you she was going to do—read and laze around the cabin. About eleven she ran a bath and got undressed. And just as she was about to take off her robe and step into the tub a little past eleven-thirty, the killer came into the bathroom and stabbed her in the back. She fell forward into the tub of water, breaking her watch against the side of the tub as she did. Then the killer turned out the lights and left."

Martha was frowning at me. "So? It makes sense to me. There's been trouble before with prowlers out there at the lake—

you know the stories we've heard."

I nodded. "But any casual prowler who had the nerve to enter an occupied cabin would bring a weapon with him. Helen was killed with a knife belonging to Dr. Osterman."

"For heaven's sake," Martha said impatiently. "He probably stumbled on the knife while he was sneaking around inside the cabin. Since Helen was in the bedroom with the water running, she wouldn't hear him."

"Maybe. But while he was stumbling on the knife, why didn't he stumble on Helen's purse? It was on the bedroom dresser in plain sight—with something over fifty dollars in it. It hadn't been touched. Neither had the diamond ring Helen was wearing."

"Well . . . perhaps he wasn't interested in robbery. Helen was an awfully attractive woman."

"Yes. But she hadn't been touched, either—except for the knife in her back."

"He panicked when he saw what he'd done, and ran—"

"Taking the time to turn out all the lights in the place as he went. Some panic."

Now the seedy outskirts of Monroe loomed up ahead. I glanced at my watch: nine-fifteen. Just about two hours since Tommy McKay had pounded on

the door of our cabin at the lake.

Martha was saying, "What do you think happened?"

"I think Helen had a visitor, someone she was expecting. But what happened then, I haven't even got a good guess."

I dropped Martha at our place, stopping long enough myself to shave and put on fresh clothes, and have a cup of coffee. Then I drove downtown. Since it was a Saturday, the streets in what passed for the business district around the courthouse square were fairly crowded.

I turned into the alley that bisected the square itself, and parked in the lot between the brick jail and the ancient heap of stone that was the Pokochabee County courthouse.

I went in the back door and along the echoing ground-floor corridor to the sheriff's office. I found Carson in his private cubbyhole, sitting back in his swivel chair with his dusty brogans propped up on his desk. He looked half asleep.

"I'm glad the voters can't see this," I told him. "The biggest murder case in years, and all you can think to do is sit here twiddling your thumbs."

The sheriff stretched, yawned, and gestured me to a chair. "Set and twiddle with me, for a spell

. . . No, I'm waitin' for the McKay boy. He phoned from his sister's place a while ago, said there was somethin' he kind of forgot to tell us this mornin'. And he figured he'd better tell it now."

"You think he—"

"Let's wait till he gets here, and ask him."

"There's one thing I just remembered," I said slowly. "He drives a pickup belonging to the store during his working hours. But I've seen him around the lake in the evenings, riding a motorcycle."

At that moment Deputy Avery shuffled in from the big outer office, carrying a clipboard stuffed with notes.

He gave me a mournful nod, and said to Carson, "I been on that phone so long both my ears is ringin'. Course, they do that anyway."

"Uh-huh. What've you got?"

"Looks like Dr. Osterman and that nurse, Zelda Ross, was tellin' the truth about last night. The doctor was in and out of the hospital till ten o'clock. At that time he started an emergency operation that lasted till after midnight. After that he went to a room in the residential quarters and got a few hours' sleep. He could've fitted in a fast trip to the lake before ten, or after midnight, but—"

"But it ain't too likely," Carson nodded.

"The Ross gal got to work at seven last night, and was on duty till seven this mornin'. She couldn't have gone to the bathroom durin' that time without half the nurses on duty with her knowin' about it. There ain't no doubt about it, she was at the hospital all night."

"All right. You talked to Helen Blair's lawyer?"

"Yeah, old Judge Fancher. She was evidently pretty well-fixed. The judge hemmed and hawed, and finally allowed that her estate would amount to more than half a million bucks. She never made a will, and don't seem to have no kinfolks, so the whole bundle will go to Osterman—if him and her was really married like he told you."

Carson nodded his gray-thatched head. "I'd bet they were. Osterman don't strike me as the type to tell you a outright lie, not if he knowed you could easily check on it."

"Outside of that, the judge wasn't no help. As far as he knew, Helen didn't have any enemies—except mebbe old Frank Ivy—and that was just business. Seems Miss Blair's dress shop was cuttin' pretty heavy into Ivy's sales at his department store."

I leaned forward in my chair and tapped ashes from my cigarette into a grimy ash tray on Carson's desk. I said, "Maybe we should give that guy some thought."

"Mebbe," the sheriff agreed, and added, "but that wife of his would have to be in it with the old coot."

Avery shifted glumly from one size twelve to the other, and went on: "I called a few people here and there that I thought might have some dirt, but no luck. Seems like since Dr. Osterman and Helen started goin' together, six, seven months ago, they both've been out of circulation, otherwise. Before that, Helen dated several of the town gents, but nothin' very heavy, in spite of all the talk. Osterman, he done his share of woman-chasin'. Ran through all the nurses in the hospital, even Zelda Ross for a while; she was a lot thinner then. But there don't seem to be anyone around with hard feelin's toward either Helen or the Doc."

I offered, "Don't forget Frank Ivy."

The sheriff shook his head. "Can you really see old Frank and his wife pussyfootin' over to that cabin last night, and puttin' a knife in Helen Blair's back? For one thing, I doubt she'd even let

them step foot in the cabin, Lon."

"They—or he—could've found the door unlocked."

"Or she might have left the screen door unhooked, and they had a key to the wooden door," Avery said helpfully. "Course, so might half the rest of the people in the county. Door opens with a plain old skeleton key. There's a bolt on it, but—"

"But it wasn't bolted. Unless the girl undid it to let in a visitor," the sheriff said.

"Or simply forgot to lock the door altogether, and some stray nut walked in," I added. "Anything's possible."

Avery said sadly, "The truth is, all we're doin' is goin' around in circles—"

Carson interrupted him by leaning forward over the desk, his gaze going past me to the open door connecting with the outer office. He called, "In here, son."

Twisting around in my chair, I saw Tommy McKay coming slowly toward us, looking as if he were on his way to the gas chamber. He entered the little private office. He looked around at me, at Deputy Avery, then at Carson.

He gulped, and burst out, "It was just that I was afraid you all would think I killed that woman! I didn't—I swear I didn't go near her! Honest, I didn't have no idea

she was dead till I went in there this mornin', just like I told Mr. Gates here."

Carson said mildly, "All right, son. For the moment, let's agree that you was just ridin' around on your motorcycle last night, and just happened to be near the Osterman cabin. Then what?"

The teen-ager's pug-nosed face grew redder. For a moment I thought he was going to break his fingers, the way he was twisting them together behind his back, as he stood there facing Carson across the desk.

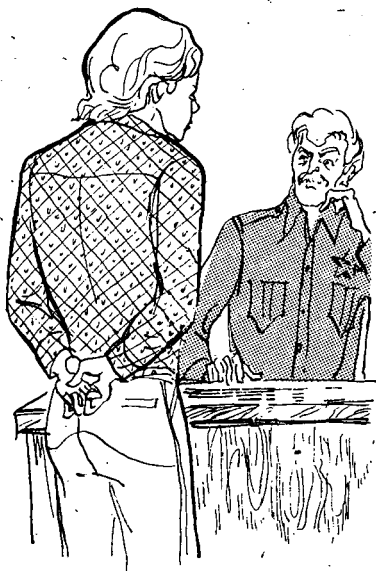
"It all sounds so durn dumb," he said. "Heck, I knew all the time that—that Miss Blair didn't really want me to come over. I was kind of livin' a daydream or somethin'. Oh, hell! I went up there last night and dragged back and forth along the lane on my cycle. I thought maybe she'd hear the noise and come out to see what was goin' on, and—and invite me to come in . . . But she didn't."

"What gave you the idea she might?" I asked.

"Her callin' the store," the kid said. "You know? I thought she was kind of hintin' she wanted me to—to come over. Durn it, I told you it was dumb!"

"What happened?"

"Well, I dragged back and forth



in front of the cabin. I knew she was still up, the lights was on in the front room and all. Finally I went on past and parked my cycle, and walked back." Tommy twisted his fingers some more, and went on: "Thing is, the shade wasn't all the way down at one of the front windows. I went across the yard and looked in. The front room was empty, so I went on around the cabin, but none of the other rooms had lights on."

"Uh-huh," the sheriff said. "Why don't you set down?"

McKay blinked at him dazedly, then shook his head. "I'm all right. Anyways, I hung around there outside the lighted window

in the front room. Hopin' she'd come in, you know? I never done anything like that before—that's the truth. But that Miss Blair . . . I don't give a damn *how* old she was. She made the girls I run around with look sick." He stopped, wiped his sweaty face on his shirt sleeve, then croaked, "You all mind if I sit down?"

Avery silently pushed a chair forward.

When the kid was perched on the edge of the seat, Carson asked, "She wasn't in the livin' room at all?"

"No, sir. Fact, I got the feelin' the cabin was empty. There weren't a sound. Nothin'. It was kind of weird."

"What time was this, Tommy?" I put in.

"I don't know, Mr. Gates. Around eleven-thirty, I guess. Maybe a little later than that. Anyway, I stayed crouched down there at the window, hopin' to—to see her. Maybe in her nightgown or maybe—you know . . ."

He paused, stared down at his hands, now knotting themselves together in his lap, then said, "That's when it happened. No warnin' or nothin'. Like to scared me out of my socks."

"What was that?"

"All at once the light in there went out. Without no one in the

room to *turn* it out, that I could see. It was a big floor lamp settin' next to an easy chair. I thought maybe somebody had been crouchin' down behind the chair where I couldn't see 'em, and had jerked the lamp cord out of its wall socket. I sort of froze up for a minute, waitin' to hear somebody come bustin' out of the cabin and around the corner to grab me—but nothin' happened."

"You didn't hear anything at all?"

"No, sir. That was the creepiest part of it, just that dead silence. When I could move, I took off along to where I'd left my cycle, and beat it back to the store and up to my room. And—that's all. This mornin' was just like I told you." He glanced timidly at Carson. "You goin' to jail me?"

"Let me think about it a while," Carson told him. "What made you decide to come in?"

"This mornin' after what happened, I went to see my sister. She lives here in town. She could tell I was worried, and kept after me till I told her. Then she said I'd better come tell you, no matter what you done to me."

"Uh-huh. You always do what your sister tells you?"

"Most times. She's smarter than me."

Carson nodded thoughtfully.

"You better go on home, then. And stay away from other people's windows at night."

"Don't worry!" the kid said decidedly, and was gone.

After a long moment, Deputy Avery said, "How about that? The killer is not only unknown, but unvisible as well."

The sheriff leaned back in his swivel chair, clasped his gnarled hands behind his head and stared up at the dingy plaster ceiling. He muttered, "Now, I wonder . . ."

Abruptly he sat forward, and picked up his phone. He got the operator and had her connect him with Osterman's cabin at the lake. After several rings he got an answer.

"Buck? This is me," he said. "You're in the front room there, ain't you? Yeah. You see an easy chair with a floor lamp beside it? Near that big radio set. Uh-huh. Go see if the lamp cord is plugged into the wall. No, I ain't funnin'!"

There was a pause. The sheriff's craggy face was set in lines of tense expectancy. I watched him curiously.

Then he said into the phone, "Yeah? Uh-huh."

An unlikely smile appeared under his bushy moustache. The phone conversation continued, the sheriff's end being the asking of

cryptic questions about makes and models, and was something a twelve- or twenty-four-hour thingamajig?

Then Carson hung up, squinted at the notes he'd scribbled, and said, "There ain't but one or two places in town that carry this kind of thing. Comin', Lon?"

We found what Carson was looking for at Frank Ivy's department store. A clerk in the electrical appliances section read the make and model numbers Carson had gotten from Buck Mullins. He rummaged around on one of the laden shelves, took down a smallish box, and said, "Here we are."

Inside the box was another box, this one made of metal. Set into it were what appeared to be four clocks.

"This here is a good item," the clerk beamed.

I suddenly saw the light. "A timer!"

"Yes, sir," agreed the clerk. "You plug it into your wall outlet. Then you can plug two separate items into the timer. See? The two top dials are the 'on' dials. The bottom two are when you want things to go off. The two sides are independent. Have a lamp, say, come on at dark and go off a couple hours later, while on the other side you could have your TV or radio."

"Uh-huh," the sheriff said. "You keep records on who buys these things?"

"No, unless it's a charge purchase, of course. Why?"

"Mebbe you could remember if you sold one of them to Dr. Paul Osterman in the last—"

"Oh, yes. He bought one early last summer."

While this was going on, I was studying the timing device. I saw that each of the clock faces was calibrated not from one to twelve, but one to twenty-four.

"So whatever you had plugged into it would come on at twenty-four hour intervals," I said.

"Right," the clerk agreed, giving me a doting smile. "People use them in their homes when, say, they're going on vacation, or going to be away on business."

"Thanks a lot," Carson said.

When we were on the street again, I asked, "Did Mullins tell you if the timer in the cabin out there is still hooked up?"

"Yep. It is," the sheriff said. "And plugged into it is that lamp, set to turn on at 8:30 tonight, off again at 11:45. And that radio—it's due at 9:30 till 9:45. Just long enough to get attention directed toward the cabin, for somebody to see the lights was on there."

We reached the county car and got into it.

"The killer didn't have a chance to get back out there and disconnect the thing before Tommy McKay found Helen's body this morning," I said. "He still hasn't had a chance."

"But he'll just about have to make a try 'fore this evenin'," Carson said. "Else those things'll be turnin' on."

"And there goes his alibi," I added.

The sheriff backed the car out from the curb, and aimed it toward the courthouse.

There, we found Avery once more on the phone. When he'd finished, he gave us a gloomy nod, and said, "You was right, Sheriff. Accordin' to the phone company records, there wasn't any call from the Osterman place at eight-thirty last night. Or any other time last night."

I stared at him. "Helen called the store out there—"

"Somebody *sayin'* they was Helen Blair called the store, but not from that phone," Avery sighed. "Howsomever, there *is* a record of a toll call from a public booth at County Memorial Hospital to the store at the lake. At eight-forty last evenin', to be exact."

Suddenly the phone rang and the sheriff took the call. It was Dr. Pearce. Carson listened in-

tently a few moments, said, "Yeah. That helps. Thanks."

"Well?" I said, as he turned slowly from the phone.

"Doc changed his mind a bit about the time of death," Carson said. "Now he allows that the woman could've been killed any-time after four or five o'clock in the afternoon, providin' her body was put into a tub of very hot water right afterwards—and left there."

I said, "That sort of opens the door, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. Doc told me somethin' else. He figures from the body's stomach contents that Helen had a meal roughly two hours before she died. What say we do a little checkin' at the cafes around here?"

Leaving Avery looking, for once, as if he might last out the day on his feet, the sheriff and I made a tour of the restaurants in Monroe's business district. No luck. Then we stopped at a ramshackle diner on a side street; it was lousy in appearance, but had the best hamburgers in the county.

Helen Blair had been there yesterday afternoon.

"Sure, Miss Blair come in around four, four-thirty," the diner manager told us. "Lovely woman. One of my best custom-

ers, she was. Yesterday she had her usual snack—two cheeseburgers and a double order of fries. Eat like a horse, and all it done to her figure was make it better.” He shook his head admiringly.

Again in the county car, the sheriff said, “Want to ride out to the lake with me?”

I didn’t bother to answer that. Minutes later we were barreling down the highway south of town. I said, “Helen could’ve had another meal later on.”

“We didn’t find no traces of it at the cabin,” Carson reminded me. “Only that one empty candy wrapper.”

“Yeah. But it could still be either Osterman—or Zelda Ross. Which one? Or someone else altogether?”

Carson took his eyes from the road long enough to glance at me. “Remember the first thing Miss Ross did when she seen you this morning?”

“Yelled at me,” I said. “Wanted to know where I was when Helen got—cut to pieces,” I think ‘was the way she put it.”

“Uh-huh. Only, up till then, I don’t think anybody had mentioned in her hearin’ that Helen was stabbed to death.”

I whistled softly. “But she would’ve had to kill Helen as soon as they reached the cabin,” I said.

“Then rushed around there setting the scene: the bathroom, the cigarette butts and book in the bedroom, placing that timer in the front room—”

“All that wouldn’t take more’n a few minutes, actually,” Carson said. “She’d been out to Osterman’s place in the past; she could easy have known about that timer, and how to work it. Bein’ a nurse, she’d also likely know how to stick a knife in somebody’s back and hit the heart first try. That takes some doin’ if you don’t know where to aim.”

“All right,” I agreed. “But Osterman would also know all that—even better. And he had half a million bucks to gain by Helen’s death. What’d Zelda have to gain?”

Carson shook his head. “Thing is, I can see her callin’ that store last night, and pretendin’ to be Helen Blair. But I can’t see Osterman, with that deep voice he’s got, foolin’ anybody about him bein’ a woman. Even over the telephone.”

“Maybe the two of them were in it together.”

“You think so?”

It was my turn to shake my head. “No, I don’t. Not for a minute.”

“Neither do I.”

It was a few minutes before

noon when we reached the lake. As we drove up the ridge and along to the Osterman cabin, I saw that there were a good many people on the lake or fishing along the shore. I wondered if Zelda Ross was among them, keeping a covert eye on the cabin on the hill and hoping against hope that she'd have a chance to get in there unobserved before evening.

At the cabin, Mullins lumbered out to meet us.

"I stood inside there, just like you told me," he greeted the sheriff. "Nobody's tried to get in."

"Good. How about you drive your car down yonder and park it out of sight," Carson said. "Then come back and do the same with my jalopy."

Deputy Mullins massaged his forehead, then brightened. "Oh, I get it. You want folks to think we've pulled out and left the cabin empty."

"That's it," Carson said.

Inside the cabin, it was dim as a cave after the bright noon sun outside. When Mullins returned, the sheriff locked the front door, removed the key, and the three of us sat down to wait.

"This could be a fool's errand," I said, after half an hour or so. "Zelda may not have the nerve to try, or she might hope that if and

when we caught onto the timing device, we'd blame it on Osterman."

The sheriff was lying back in an easy chair, with his ancient gray hat tipped forward over his eyes. He muttered, "Mebbe. But I'm bettin' she comes."

"But what was the motive, jealousy?" I said. "If that was it, why wait all these months? And why put on this act of being such good friends with Helen all this time?"

Mullins rumbled, casually, "What if Miss Ross just found out yesterday that the doctor and Helen Balir had gone and got married?"

I stared. "Yeah. Buck, I owe you an apology."

"Huh?"

"I keep making the mistake of thinking that you're as dumb as you look."

The sheriff sat up abruptly, waving a hand for silence.

There came the soft *think* of a car door closing outside. Footsteps. Then, after a long minute, the rattle of a key in the door lock.

Quickly we moved into the hallway beyond the livingroom.

Then the door opened, and Zelda Ross slipped in, shut the door and leaned back against it. Taking a deep breath, she crossed the room, and her bulky form

knelt down at the wall behind the radio-stereo set.

"That's enough, Miss Ross," said Carson, stepping out of the shadowy hallway.

Zelda stayed as she was for a few seconds. Then she slowly straightened and turned to face us. Her chubby face was pale and her eyes darted from one to the other of us.

"I had—something I forgot—oh, to hell with it. I wasn't cut out to be a murderer." She tried a shaky smile. "I haven't got the figure for it."

After Carson had placed her under arrest, and after she had waived her right to have an attorney present; we asked a few questions, enough to make it clear things had happened much as we thought, even to the motive.

"On the way out here, that—that woman told me they were married," she said huskily. "It was just too much. Throwing it in my face like that . . . She knew how I felt about Paul. All this time, I expected—hoped—that he'd get tired of Helen and come back to me. She was such a shallow woman, always talking about how she could eat anything and not gain a pound . . ."

Zelda suddenly put her hands to her face and moaned softly, but she made no resistance as Carson took her elbow and guided her toward the open door.

Then she hesitated, dropping her hands to look up into the sheriff's face, and said, "Do you think we could stop somewhere on the way into town? I'm dying for something to eat."



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